Without Sin

A Novel

By

Martin J. Pritchard [pseud]

Mrs. Augustus Moore

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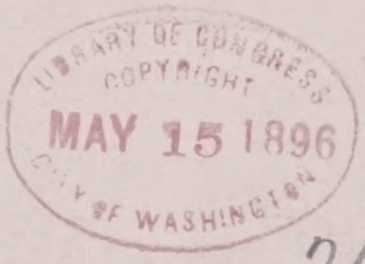

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WITHOUT SIN

CHAPTER I

It was the moment of dawn, and London for a brief space lay empty and silent beneath an opalescent sky. Out in the Green Park the ruffled birds, roused from their brief summer night's sleep, stretched their wings and preened themselves in the warm flood of pink light that filtered through the broad leafage of the plane trees. But in the streets off Piccadilly, narrow and hemmed with tall houses, the pale dusk still lingered.

A shower had fallen about midnight, and the gas-lamps were mirrored in the wet pavement as the man whose duty it was to extinguish them passed down Bond Street towards Piccadilly. He walked mainly in the road, crossing from side to side as he came upon each lamp. The damp ground deadened the ring of his footsteps, till they scarcely struck an echo from the sleepy houses.

When he reached the last lamp and turned into Piccadilly, Bond Street lay grey and dead and empty. A few of the upper windows presently caught the growing light, and stared with a startling blankness at the shadowy outline of a policeman who lounged within a deep doorway, and at a cat which, with lowered tail and stealthy tread, was slinking homewards.

Halfway down Old Bond Street, the heavy iron shutters, painted a light starch blue, of Ephraim Levinge's Art Galleries, made a clear and bright patch in the morning's dusk,

but the gold lettering which crossed the shop front was still blurred and indistinct. Behind the shutters, in that portion of the shop which was reached directly from the street, some tall carved cabinets filled with china, and a colossal pair of marble figures were enshrouded in grey gloom, but beyond, in the great gallery, the glass roof of which was shadowed by no high buildings, the day grew quickly and lustily, until the two small gas-jets which burnt all night for safety's sake flickered and faded like dying candles.

Here within the four walls, papered in a soft, rich shade of crimson flock, were collected the fruits of a hundred labouring minds, the works of a thousand toiling hands, the world's art of five hundred years. Tapestries stitched by the slim fingers of royal dames and damosels, whose lords and lovers were fighting for their faith's sake in far Palestine, made misty backgrounds for delicate cabinets of Vernis Martin microscopically clear. Tulip-wood commodes, overlaid with fine marqueterie and mounted with chased or-molu, bulged among slender Sheraton *chef-d'œuvres* and the mannered simplicity of Empire escritoires. The Dubarry's toilet-table and mirror reflected the coarse features of a pictured Marat. Limoges enamels and Cosway's miniatured beauties filled the ebony recesses of an old Italian cabinet which gleamed with the scarlet and amber of clear cornelians and the milky whiteness of rare onyxes. The tortured limbs of an ivory Christ, torn in war-time from the shrine of some peasant's church among the southern vineyards and yellowed with the passing of centuries, separated the round eyes and bare bosom of a Dutch beauty as painted by Jan Van Eyck from a corner of farmyard life in Morland's best style.

Beneath the glass tops of the show-tables, jewelled watches and daggers, rings and rare scraps of the old Venetian goldsmith's work, sparkled amid the filmy web of laces

which still savoured of the incense that had smoked about the altars of Spain, or had decked the feast-day robes of some waxen-faced saint.

Beneath the apex of the clear glass roof gleamed the cold perfections of half a score of statues, the crude whiteness of their limbs heightened by the brilliant hues of many tall vases which had once blazed in the Imperial apartments of the Pekin Palace.

Rare crackle and priceless blue, jewelled Sèvres and floreated Dresden shone from behind the glazed doors of the rosewood cabinets on which Chippendale himself had worked. The cabinets stood either side of the fireplace, the polished steel grate of which, together with a plain mahogany writing-table placed at right angles, looked startlingly modern and utilitarian among the vanities and glories of dead ages.

A sun-ray, flung back in cold reflection from an upper window, struck down through the glass roof. It glowed redly on a faded strip of arras, hanging from a brass rod across a small door which gave access to the rooms above the shop.

Suddenly through the stillness of the dead past came the soft footsteps of a living present, and the sound of a carefully drawn bolt only by a second preceded the stirring of the blurred figures on the worn arras into a quivering life. A hand, tiny and white and dimpled as that of a marble Amorini, pushed aside the heavy folds, and into the midst of the art of the world, among the treasures of gone kings and queens, the relics of the ravishing fripperies of famous light-o'-loves, glided a girl-child.

She was little for her ten years, with the slender limbs and narrow, arched feet tradition claims for long lineage and blue blood. In colouring she was fair, and for a child a thought too pale, but the fresh ripeness of her bow-shaped mouth dispelled the idea of ill-health. Her hair, which

rolled in heavy tangled curls below her waist, was of a very light gold where it fluffed in loose disorder about her face, and it only suggested a fuller tint of red in the shadows of the mass. Her forehead was white and round, and crossed by thin, slightly arched brows of the suggested pale-red tint. The nose was perfect, small, and straight, and but slightly widened where the thin, sensitive nostrils melted into the smooth curves of the cheeks. The chin was short and round, and creased with one slight dimple, but it was too small for strength, thereby belying the clear-cut and firm lines of the mouth.

So far the features were those of a singularly pretty child, a little too pensive, and formed perhaps for ideal youth, but possessing, despite that, a quaint charm. Yet it was the eyes, with all their defects of colour and shape, which made at once the peculiarity and fascination of the face. They were set rather far apart, and were of a decided almond shape, the effect of which was enhanced by the thick white eyelids, which seemed depressed by the singular fulness below the arch of the brow. In colour they were rather a light grey, saved from shallowness, coldness, and insincerity, by the intense blackness of the fine lashes. They had an unfathomable depth, a vague suggestion of mysterious introspection, an expression that was so absolutely unmundane, that they lent to the child's whole personality an atmosphere of etherealism.

She was clad in a frock of pink cotton, which, as she had dressed herself, remained frankly unbuttoned at the back where her small fingers could not reach. Nothing daunted by the strange effect of the new morning light on the oddly mingled contents of the Art Gallery, the little girl dropped the arras behind her and advanced. With light, leisurely steps she threaded her way among the polished inlaid tables burdened with rare porcelain and the huge Oriental vases

which would have crushed her had they fallen. Now and then she paused in her passage to lay her warm baby hands on the satin of a chair or the heavy bosses of a carven chest.

"I've come to say good-bye, I've come to say good-bye," she murmured, as though she desired to justify herself in the nursery crime of breaking the bounds of the upper part of the house, by stealing downstairs to the forbidden ground of the "Big Room," as she had called the gallery ever since she could remember. With a childish sense of fairness she noticed each object in her path, until she came to the eastern end of the gallery where the deep bay of the ceiling still cast a blue shadow.

Into the dimmest corner she crept with infinite care, wedging her slender body between a heavy gilt chair and a high carved pedestal of ebony and ivory.

"I've come to say good-bye."

A faint note of regret threaded her childish treble, and a pucker of pain drew her brows together.

She stood before a small picture of the Madonna, painted on a panel in the style of the early Italian school. From a background of transparent cobalt, the fair face of the Virgin shone like a jewel, transcendently holy, humanly pitiful. From beneath the gauze drapery which veiled the hair of palest corn-colour, the tender eyes, half-hidden by the lowered white eyelids, gazed with divine benignity at the child. As the day grew to fuller glory, the thin thread of gold above the saint's head, and the great graven clasp which held a royal cloak of worked green velvet across an underdress of pink, shone brightly, and in the quiver of the reflected light, the silent sad mouth seemed to the child to smile. In response she crept closer to the picture, and laid her lips against the glass which covered the panel.

"I'm going away to-day to school, and I am not coming back till I am quite a big girl. But I shall never forget

you, for grandfather says I am like you, so does Martin. Oh, I hope I am! I would like to be."

With one dimpled finger she traced the outline of the pictured face, then passed her hand about her own cheeks, whispering, as she did so:

"Martin always says that you were good, the goodest woman that ever lived. If I look like you, perhaps I shall be as good as you—one day—when I am grown up."

Presently, with the natural unrest of a child, she slipped from her cramped place and continued her wanderings. On a shelf near by stood a tiny Dresden shepherdess. It was to be hers one day if she were a good girl, and she looked at it now with a smile of prospective possession. On the ground beneath the shelf was a heap of stuffs: old brocades smelling of camphor chests, embroidered muslins faintly sweet of dead roses, and strips of finely drawn lawn, the work of patient German fingers.

The little girl dragged the scented pile into the light, which now flooded the gallery in a golden haze of sunshine from end to end. Her tiny hands turned over and sorted the stuffs, while her budding femininity saw a use for the smallest scraps. How sweet her best doll, Mabella, would look in this bit of scarlet and gold, and if only her grandfather would give her that piece of blue brocade, Martin could re-cover the drawing-room furniture in her doll's house.

"I wonder if he will give it me," she said to herself. "He cannot want a tiny bit like that. I must beg—I must coax." She raised her eyes, already in imaginary supplication. They fell upon the picture in the corner. The pure sweet face, to the child's imagination, always responsive to every emotion, was sad, and seemed to express reproof. As though caught in an act of naughtiness, she flushed scarlet. "I forgot you," she said; "I am sorry."

With her innocent heart filled with a desire for forgive-

ness, and unable to plead her cause in words, she gravely and in perfect faith smoothed out a strip of the cobwebby lawn and placed it scarf-wise on her head. That done, she pulled a stiff piece of worked brocade about her shoulders, and, trailing the rustling folds behind her, stepped towards the sacred picture.

"Tell me how to be good," she pleaded, as she scrambled up into the gilt chair, from between the bowed arms of which the Pompadour had ruled France. Curled in the satiny depths the child lay quiet and still, till from very inaction and the hothouse warmth of the gallery the heavy lids drooped, the baby lips parted, and the little maid slept.

Outside, in the sunny streets, the first low roar of awakened London throbbed skywards. The lumber of waggons was punctuated by the shrill jingle of milk carts, and the buoyant rattle of light, home-going hansoms. The first 'buses, laden with heavy-eyed work-girls and sallow young clerks, snatching a brief smoke before business hours, and reading flimsy halfpenny papers, rolled down Bond Street. A sudden crop of dust-pails sprang mushroom-like from the kerbstones, and the opening shops gave up a stuffy, close odour to the fresh summer air.

The postman walked briskly down the street, nodding "good-morning" to the servants and cleaners at the shop doors. As he neared the pale-blue, blank front of Ephraim Levinge's art gallery, a small door in the iron shutter was opened from within, and a touzled-headed youth in rather dirty shirt-sleeves and a green baize apron stepped yawning into the brilliant sunlight.

"Oh! lor," he cried, as the postman came within earshot, "you don't mean to tell me as it's eight o'clock?"

"Seven minutes past, young man; I began at the end of the street on the stroke of the hour," said the postman sharply.

With a smothered groan, the boy clutched the proffered bundle of correspondence and then dived into the twilight of the shop, from whence, in another moment, issued the creaking of an ill-oiled winch, as he began to slowly wind up the revolving shutter.

The flood of garish light which poured in from the street roused the dreaming child. She slid from her silken throne and stood in all the quaintness of her gorgeous draperies before her beloved picture.

"Good-bye! good-bye!" she whispered, her upturned mouth momentarily misting the clearness of the glass over the panel.

"I've caught you, Miss Mary, have I? A nice fright you give me when I found your bed empty. Oh! you naughty girl!" And the frightened maid shook the child until the clear lawn scarf slipped sideways over her curls and the single button of her frock gave way.

"Bessie! What has Miss Mary been doing? Mr. Levinge would be very angry if he saw you shake her like that."

The voice came from the outer shop, where, outlined black against the dazzling sunshine, a man stood. So intense was the contrast between the dim light of indoors and the white glare of the street that it was impossible to see his face. But one glance at the silhouetted form showed him to be tall and spare, with sloping shoulders slightly bent, and a long narrow head craning forward from between them.

The little girl sprang forward as he spoke.

"Oh! Martin, I am not naughty, indeed I'm not; I only came to say good-bye to Our Lady."

"And what time did you set about doing it, I should like to know, miss?" snapped the servant, whose wrath against her charge did not dare to do more than smoulder in the presence of Mr. Baird, the business manager and right hand to Ephraim Levinge.

"I came down before the birds began to sing," answered the child directly.

"Then p'raps you'll just come upstairs and be decently dressed," said Bessie, stripping little Mary's royal brocade and transparent veil from her and tossing them on a chair with all a true-born Philistine's contempt for old "rags."

"I'll come, Bessie," replied the child gently. "You'll see me off, won't you, Martin?" she added, putting out her little hand to the silent figure before her. "I go away to school to-day."

"I shall see you before you start, certainly," replied Martin Baird, turning towards the ample writing-table in the front shop at which the intricate accounts of Ephraim Levinge's vast business were kept. As he took off his hat, which was of silk and scrupulously glossy, though scarcely of the latest fashion, and turned to hang it on its usual peg above the iron safe, the light fell full upon his face.

Martin Baird was a Scotchman, and showed his nationality in every line of the high forehead, from which already the grizzled hair was in rapid retreat; in the deep-set, small, grey eyes, the close-shaven long upper-lip, which shut like a trap upon the softer lines of its fellow, and in the broad rugged jaw and square chin. He was but forty-five, but early sorrows and a certain grim defiance of fate had written another decade across his brow.

Those who had business transactions with him said they had sooner far traffic with old Levinge himself, for there was always a faint chance of a good deal with the Jew, but with the Scotchman never.

Men and women were nothing to him. Neither the millionaires who clattered up to his employer's door in all the pomp and circumstance of Barker-built broughams and matched blood horses, nor the fair women who left the perfume of their silken skirts and the ring of their light laughter

behind them. Neither for those who came to sell or to buy, nor Jew nor Gentile; neither the honest soul who had come to misfortune's direst straits, nor the acknowledged "fence." For they were but atoms in that gigantic social system which had left his mother to die a drab's death in a ditch, and had chained him through his childhood, youth, and the best days of his man's estate to the worst horrors of beggary and starvation.

But for his employer, who had picked him out of the ignominy of an old-clothes store in the New Cut—the shrewd old Jew who had scented acumen beneath his rags and had read honesty in his hungry, sunken face, who had trained his broad bony hands to tell a piece of *pâte tendre* in the dark, and his keen, small eyes to settle the painter of a doubtful picture at a glance, for the man who had fed and clothed and saved him from worse than death, for his master and his friend, Baird would have died to express sufficient gratitude and devotion. And the little child? She with floss-gold hair, that only glowed with richer tints in the shades of its meshes; she with the eyes that saw beyond the edges of the world; she with the plaintive bow-shaped mouth that seemed meet for the kisses of Sorrow? All the crushed affection and despised sentiment of the man's loveless life revived and fed on the fair innocence, the flower-like purity of Ephraim Levinge's grand-daughter, Mary. From the first hour, when from amid the wealth of continents she had toddled to greet him, an outcast and a starveling, the reverence which lies in the hearts of all men for the pure and spotless had gathered in a halo of worship about the tiny creature.

Martin Baird was not a religious man. The grand belief of a blind faith which accepts the axiom "whatever is, is right" has been killed within him by a cruel boyhood, and a youth spent in the sordid struggle for mere existence. The

desperate animalism of the body had ousted the faith of the soul. But when the child's faltering footsteps grew firmer, the baby lisp more distinct, and the precociously forming face and colouring of the little girl repeated in flesh the vague outlines of a dingy little panel picture of the Madonna which hung in a dark corner of the shop, vague stories and forgotten lessons stirred in Baird's heart. The seeds of a dead faith quickened into life, and fostered by the mysticism of a restrained Northern temperament, grew to a strange idea, half chimerical, half real, yet wholly fantastic.

For three years he had justified the art dealer's faith in him, and had so assisted the old Jew in his business that the building of the great gallery at the back of the shop became a necessity. Then Baird gave his quaint fancy reins, and he boldly hung the unnamed picture, now restored and set in a frame of old Italian carving, among the works by the masters of the world.

"What's that rubbish doing here?" had cried Levinge in his gutteral English. "I won't have that in my fine new gallery. Everything here is signed and authentic. Turn it out! Turn it out, I say, at once!"

"I shouldn't do that, if I were you, Mr. Levinge," had answered Baird in his deliberately thoughtful fashion. "It's true there is not a mark to show who painted the picture. But you can see it's of the grand Umbrian school—the greatest school of Italy. The painting is exquisite—and now that it is cleaned, it glows like a jewel."

"Well enough—well enough," returned the other, peering under his heavy grey eyebrows at the work. "But my patrons like pedigree. People who don't know anything about what they are buying, want to feel sure they are not being made fools of. That's why people come to me; I always give 'em a good name, and the real article for their money."

"But you are not obliged to sell that picture," said Baird very slowly.

"Not sell that picture," almost screamed the old man, all the Semitic instinct in revolt against the idea of keeping something which would not fetch a price. "What would you have me do with it? Give it away?"

"No, keep it. Why, sir, don't you see who it is exactly like?"

Ephraim Levinge thrust his gold-rimmed spectacles across his large bony nose, and looked long and closely at the painting.

"It's exactly like little Miss Mary; the mouth, the hair, even the shape of the brows, which are so high above the eyes. I should not part with it, sir."

And through the years the beautiful Madonna—"Mary's picture"—as the family called it, with the tender, meek look, scarcely fitting the royal raiment clasped about her, hung like a luminous gem in Ephraim Levinge's Art Gallery.

And in the twilight of the summer evenings when business hours were over, and the pale-blue iron curtain shut out Bond Street and the world, Mary would creep downstairs as lightly as a spirit child, to Martin Baird, who would take the little Jewish maiden on his knee, and weave from slumbering memories stories of the Holy Virgin and of the martyred Saints, that being forbidden were sweet with mystery and the pleasures of a secret to the child.

And every night as she reluctantly left her strangely chosen friend, and glided away to her little bedroom, she would smile up at the picture and whisper:

"I am glad my name is Mary, and that I look like her."

CHAPTER II

It was a summer's day in mid-season, five years later.

The long line of carriages which filled King Street from end to end, the crowd of servants which lounged and gossiped round the heavy porch of Christie's, and the never-ending stream of people which flowed through the wide swing doors, betokened that one of the great sales of the season was going on within.

The accumulated treasures of Simeon V. Dexter, Esq., of New York, Chicago, and London, bankrupt, millionaire, and bankrupt again, had a world-wide reputation, and for three days all society, in its prettiest summer frock and glossiest silk hat, had assisted at the sale of the tables at which it had dined and supped, the lounges on which it had flirted and giggled, and the rare curios which it had envied scarcely six months ago. And as each lot was put up, a thousand piquant reminiscences bubbled from the prettiest lips of London.

To-day the pictures and the china were to be sold, and a strong element of art collectors leavened the merely fashionable throng. By the time Mr. Wood, in severe morning dress, and with his pink face glowing behind his gold-rimmed glasses from the heat, had stepped into the rostrum, the East Room was nearly full. The green walls, barred across with stout strips of wood, were hidden almost from the floor to the deep bay of the ceiling by the pictures which hung in long lines under the strong top light.

The narrow cane-seated benches placed by the double line of baize-covered tables were filled by the Jew dealers. Im-

maculately dressed, perfectly groomed, and most of them wearing flowers in their buttonholes, their full dark eyes were everywhere, and their fingers, thick and beringed, scratched perpetual notes on the margins of their catalogues. The chief characteristic of the dealer permeated every feature of their eager faces. There were bargains to be made, commissions to be charged, buying and selling to be done, and the biggest swell among them forgot for the moment his Saturdays at Hurst Park and Kempton, and his Sundays at Maidenhead, to wonder how the prices would run, and whether a "good thing" could be picked up cheap.

Behind them pressed and surged, in waves of many colours, a deep line of women, their light laces and flower-trimmed hats catching an extra bloom of freshness by contrast with the black frock coats of the men. Round the outer edge of all, ebbed and flowed a tide of society men. The dealers at the green tables were better dressed than they were, but they lacked the supple length of limb and high-bred air of insouciant ease, which characterised these leisured idlers.

The sale began, and amid the dull bidding for the first dozen pictures, people settled down to attention and by degrees stopped talking. An exquisite landscape by Crome, with luminous mellow distances, and the foreground bathed in clear sunlight, first roused the rather languid competition. Both Birmingham and Manchester wanted the picture, and the bidding rose from hundreds to thousands by leaps and bounds. As the price rose, the flowery head-pieces of the women ceased to oscillate, and the dark eastern faces of the dealers grew eager, and their eyes bright. A gasp of belief and wonder followed the tap from the rostrum which announced a Brummagem victory. Mr. Wood smiled inscrutably at his intimates; the buyers had tasted blood, and the day's sale would be a good one.

While shrewd eyes were glancing at the next lot, there was a slight stir near the door, where a small, spare man, long past the middle age, was elbowing his way though the crowd. He was tightly buttoned in a well-worn frock coat, and his collar, which was encircled by a bird's-eye handkerchief, scraped his shaven chin. The sallow face and high-bridged nose were drawn and immobile, but the eyes were a bright, clear hazel and never at rest. Side-whiskers, dyed snuff-brown and tightly curled down either cheek, gave the last touch of old-world aristocracy to the millionaire Duke of Grandchester.

In his wake was his artistic *fides Achates*, Ephraim Levinge. The great art dealer's rusty hat and long greasy overcoat, which in cut was very like a gaberdine, set the old man as far apart from his curled and scented compatriots, as his squat body rolling on short thick legs and his large fleshy features proclaimed him of a different race from the well-built, clear-skinned Englishmen. Yet three dames of high degree waylaid and took counsel of the old man as he pushed by them, and the dog's-eared pocket-book he carried contained more commissions than any half-dozen of the other dealers could muster between them. He and the Duke soon reached the top of the room, where a seat was quickly found for Levinge. "Nine hundred—and twenty—and thirty—fifty—seventy-five," said Mr. Wood as quietly as though he were sitting in his own private room.

A little woman, standing at the other side of the tables, with an absurd nose, a mouth of extraordinary dimensions and marvellous humour, and a pair of large grey eyes which would have redeemed the face of a Gorgon, turned to a lady at her side and said in a stage whisper:

"Heavens! There's papa, and with Levinge too. I should like to know where my next quarter's allowance will come from."

She spoke with such frankness, that a titter ran through the group about her.

"Don't speak so loud, Theo," murmured her companion. "You know the Duke always likes to run in here. I don't suppose he'll buy much."

"Oh! won't he. I know papa better than you do, remember," answered the first speaker, shaking her small brown head till the sheaf of poppies and cornflowers which nodded atop of her hat became positively prismatic in the sunlight. "Why was he in such a hurry to come back from Paris, where he always enjoys himself, if it wasn't to have a fling at this sale? I wish I could get at Levinge, I'd positively forbid him to bid for papa." And with a toss of her well-dressed head and a twist of her pretty shoulders, the aggrieved dame took to alternately frowning at Ephraim Levinge and shaking her head at the Duke of Grandchester. "Four hundred—and five—and ten" intoned the auctioneer.

"Who is the ugly woman over there who is making such an exhibition of herself; she's quite too vulgar for anything."

It was a typical daughter of Judah who spoke in high, nasal tones. Tall and thin to attenuation, the large, prominent bones of her shoulders and hips gave her a square, box-like appearance, which was in no way mitigated by the extravagantly fashionable make of her white crepon gown. Her skin was thick and sallow. Her hair, of a pale ash colour, was dressed in precise curls across her high forehead, and cast no softening shadow above the cold expressionless eyes of slate blue, and the long, thin nose, which was distinguished as far as the tip, where it became fleshy and pendulous. The mouth matched the hard eyes and the peevish voice. It was thin, bloodless and down-drawn at the corners, the mouth of a woman who is either a sufferer or a shrew.

The young man to whom she spoke turned towards her a pink, clean-shaven countenance, the natural vacuousness of which was momentarily relieved by an expression of intense alarm.

"Dear Mrs. Mossenthal, what are you saying? That's Lady Theo Ballestier, quite a 'smartie,' and next you—for goodness sake don't turn round just now—is her aunt, Sybilla, Countess of Windover." A gentle tap from the ivory hammer announced a sale.

"Mr. Treuberg, Frankfort," murmured Mr. Wood, noting down the address of the buyer.

Mrs. Mossenthal never flushed, her skin was too thick, but as Mr. Chant spoke she tightened her lips into an ominously thick line and glared ostentatiously, to convey the impression that the derogatory remark had emanated from some one in her vicinity.

Bidding now became brisk. Mr. Wood's keen eyes glanced from side to side, catching the slightest nods and movements of the well-known buyers. The heat became intense, and only the crackle of waving fans rose from the weary crowd. The dust hung in a golden haze under the skylight and mingled flatly with the rising odour of a hundred perfumes. The blue roses and red poppies which flourished from every feminine coiffure flashed indefinite rainbow combinations; the real blossoms in the men's coats grew faint and brown.

As the afternoon grew older and the gems of the collection fell before the inexorable hammer, many of the onlookers forced their way towards the door. The cooler air blowing up the wide stairs from the street and the dimmer light of the vestibule were delicious after the stifling atmosphere of the sale-room.

"Ouf!" said Lady Theo Bellastier, taking a huge breath of fresh air and shaking out her skirts as she emerged from

the doorway. "What a wicked atmosphere. Is it the pictures or the people who make it so intolerably stuffy? I feel positively cooked, and I'm sure for the last half-hour papa has looked as if he were going off into a fit. However do you manage to keep so cool, Adela?" She glanced from her inferior height to Lady St. Cyprien, a woman more than common tall, her stately carriage of both head and shoulders rendering her even more imposing. Dark eyes, which could flash in anger or melt in tenderness, were set deep beneath straight black brows. The nose was rather high and thin. The mouth and chin strong as those of a man. Her clear olive skin was lightly touched with rouge on the cheeks, but neither dye nor powder marred the perfection of her snow-white hair, which at the age of fifty-five had transformed Lady St. Cyprien from a plain woman into an acknowledged beauty.

She looked down now from her superior inches and showing a fine set of white teeth, said:

"You fidget yourself into a fever, Theo. Ah! here comes Mrs. Van der Hoyte."

A little American, with her sharp face a-beam with smiles and diffusing an atmosphere of Worth and Streeter about her, minced up to the two ladies. She had only been in London three months and was making her way in society with very fair success—and boundless expenditure.

"How d'you do, Lady St. Cyprien?" she twanged as she approached. "Sakes! wasn't it warm in there, and—oh my! some of the pictures! If Dexter's mother could have seen them she would have died of shame. What Mr. Van der Hoyte will say when he finds I've bought that Teniers, I don't know."

But Lady Theo Bellastier, having small patience with the vulgarity of false modesty, turned away to chatter with a very lovely woman, whose misty blue eyes and delicate

flower face gleamed from among the sparkle of diamonds and a cloud of perfumed laces.

"My! does Lady Theo know that woman?" hissed Mrs. Van der Hoyte in a loud whisper. "She was hired girl to my mother out in Buffalo ten years ago."

"Myra Clyde is teaching me 'Lu! La! Lay!' and that jolly dance of hers," said Lady Theo, as the popular star nodded her "good-day," and ran down to her carriage. "I'm getting to do that queer little kick perfectly. You shall all see it at the Westlake's next Sunday."

Mrs. Van der Hoyte was *gauche* enough to look shocked.

"But do you know what Myra Clyde's position was!"

"Perfectly," answered Lady Theo, drawing her slender figure up with considerable dignity. "And I also know what my position is. Adela, if you want to go up to Levinge's about those Chelsea figures, I can drop you. I'm going up Bond Street."

Her little ladyship gave the American the chilliest of bows, and with Lady St. Cyprien was half way down the stairs, when a high-pitched, plaintive voice arrested her.

"Dearest ladies, for heaven's sake don't run away like that. How on earth is a poor male thing to know what you've got on without having even a glimpse of you."

The sleek-headed, pink-faced youth, who had been standing next Mrs. Mossenthal in the sale-room, came, with much waving of his glossy hat and well-gloved hands, down the stairs.

He called himself a society journalist—one of those nebulous beings who flash and flutter for a few years about the skirts of women; who spring from nowhere, and speedily sink into nothingness; who dine and visit in a middle-class set, the doings of which they do not care to chronicle, and who track down and scribble about people into whose houses they would never be admitted.

But Lady Theo was democratic and good-humoured, and she cried, with one of her wide smiles:

"Well, you may have one peep. But you don't deserve it, Mr. Chant, you really don't," and she shook a slim finger at him.

Mr. Bertie Chant's smooth round cheeks turned from pink to red, and he shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"The lady with me, you mean?"

Lady Theo nodded.

"My dear creature," he piped, "if ever you know her—she's a Mrs. Mossenthal—you'll find out she's a woman with an iron will—positively iron, I do assure you. She quite ordered me to bring her here to-day, because she had heard all you smart folk were coming, and——"

"And she gave you a perfect luncheon cooked by that *chef* of hers first, I'll be bound, and drove you down here in her new victoria. You see I know all about her. Women don't go to the same dressmaker for nothing. But why can't you be content to eat her dinners and win her money at 'bac.'—I hear they play high at her house—without being seen in public with her? She's so shockingly tribal."

Mr. Chant so far forget his manners as to remind Lady Theo that she herself not infrequently dined at Jews' houses.

"My dear boy, *tu quoque* is no argument. Of course I dine with the chosen when I choose. Their cooks are generally twenty times better than my own, and they don't mind losing their money to one of us, and they always pay up at once. But all the same, I shouldn't think of driving round the Park with a woman like that, and speaking to her under the noses of my own set. So don't go and say in one of your papers that 'you noticed Lady Theo Bellastier in pink

chatting to Mrs. Mossenthal in blue,' because if you do, I'll never speak to you again."

"What a queer woman you are, Theo," said Lady St. Cyprien, as their carriage turned into St. James's Street.

"What have I been doing now?"

"You don't mind who sees you talking to that dreadful music-hall creature, Myra Clyde, who is quite the most notorious woman in town just now, and yet you would not have your father see you bowing to a Mrs. Mossenthal. I really don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do, Adela," said Lady Theo, with a light laugh. "To know a Myra Clyde is merely an eccentricity. Such people as she are so entirely apart from one's life that one can pick them up and throw them away again like a pair of gloves. Besides, Myra is so awfully amusing. But the type of the wealthy Jewess is very different. Her money and her social ambition render a her factor with which one has to reckon. Mrs. Mossenthal could probably buy me up to-morrow, and she knows it; but all the same, she'd give her little finger to get me to her house. No, I won't come into Levinge's, thanks. I always buy such a lot of things there, and I'm harder up than ever just now. Besides, I see Aunt Sybilla's carriage at the door, and I expect she and papa are inside. If they catch me, they'll read me such a jeremiad about Ellis Vyvyan's poker party last Wednesday. It was an awful evening. I lost everything, and Lady Carstairs was furious because I didn't pay at once, and said she should speak to papa or my husband. Ugh! How I hate a spiteful woman. *Au revoir.*"

CHAPTER III

As Lady St. Cyprien entered the cool dusk of Ephraim Levinge's shop, Martin Baird, in his severely cut frock coat and with his grizzled hair brushed in a hard line across his forehead, came forward from the large gallery beyond.

"Mr. Levinge will be back in a few minutes if you wish to see him."

"Of course Lady St. Cyprien will wait, milady," said a loud masculine voice behind him. "Come in here, Adela, and help me choose Maria Vane a wedding present. Grandchester has got his nose into a bundle of old prints, and is no good at all."

Sybilla, Countess of Windover, had the voice and gait of a man in petticoats, and cultivated, even in the uncompromising rigidity of her side curls, the extraordinary likeness she bore her brother, the Duke of Grandchester. She had a strong harsh voice, and affected a blunt speech and brusque manner which made her more feared than loved in her own circle.

"Yes!" the Dowager proclaimed in her strident tones, as her kinswoman, Lady St. Cyprien, joined her, "I am going to give Levinge one more chance, though I vowed I would never come near his place again when I found he had charged me twenty-five guineas for that beau-pot affair I gave the Princess on her last birthday. An absurd price, and I told him so." The old lady, who was the widow of three wealthy peers, thumped the floor with her gold-headed cane, then raised it and pointed at Baird.

"But I've been telling Baird that if I give this place another trial I must have something that's cheap. These girls and their wedding presents are a perfect nuisance."

"Then why give her anything at all, cousin Sybilla?" said Lady St. Cyprien in her soft, gentle voice.

"Bless me!" cried Lady Windover, lowering her stick to the ground again and vigorously punctuating her sentences with the ferruled end. "Bless me, Adela, how dense you are! Maria Vane is marrying twenty-five thousand a year, the finest place in the Highlands, and a steam yacht. I'm going to spend a month with her in Scotland next autumn. Ah! here's Levinge at last. Now, Levinge, I want something for a present, but I won't pay more than ten pounds."

Ephraim Levinge shuffled slowly into the gallery, which, with its pictures and tapestries, made a warm background to the sculptured nymphs and cupids. The exquisite tints of the china, the polished inlay, the flower-strewn silks, and old-world timepieces looked very pretty in the yellow light filtering through the linen blinds which were drawn across the glass roof. Into the little group of English aristocrats came the Polish Jew, his coarse strong face, in which every characteristic feature of his tribe was exaggerated, his short ungainly figure and big-boned hands contrasting strangely with the finer lines and gracious bearing of his customers. He looked sharply at the Countess over his gold-rimmed spectacles, and said, in his thick speech:

"Good-day, milady. So you've come back to me. Didn't Phillips down the street serve you so well? I saw your ladyship's carriage outside his place for an hour last Friday." The Countess of Windover flushed through her frankly laid-on rouge. She was angry at being reminded of that visit to the rival dealer's, which had resulted in her spending a lot of money on something she did not want.

"I only come back to you, Levinge, because Phillips's prices are worse than yours," she said bluntly. "But this time I won't give much. Ten guineas is the limit, Levinge, ten guineas. Now, what about that, eh?" and the awful stick was thrust into the midst of a priceless service of egg-shell china, with a pedigree which proved that the fair Fitz-Herbert and the First Gentleman in Europe had sipped green tea from the tiny cups in the Brighton Square of old Steyne.

"I don't think that would suit your ladyship at all," said the old man without flinching. He knew the parsimony of his customer too well to be even a little anxious lest she should so much as crack one of those fragile gewgaws.

The Duke of Grandchester, having finished with the prints, had started on a tour of inspection round the gallery, and, as was his wont, pulled up in front of the unsigned picture.

"That's still here, I see," he said over his shoulder to Baird.

"I do not think Mr. Levinge wishes to part with it, your Grace."

The Duke fixed his sharp hazel eyes on the sweet grave face.

"Well, if ever he wants the room it takes, let me know. I'd give a good deal to have it."

"What's that?" cried Lady Windover. "Going to buy another picture? Where will you hang it? Chester Castle is lined with them from garret to basement."

"There's always room for a gem like this," said the Duke.

"Why, who is the thing by?" snapped the old lady.

"It is unsigned, milady," said Baird. "But either Crivelli or Botticelli."

"Crivelli! Botticelli! fiddlesticks! The thing looks as though it had been painted yesterday," and she lunged at the panel with her cane.

"Yesterday was Sunday, milady," said old Levinge with a malicious twinkle in his bleared eyes.

Sybilla, Countess of Windover, sniffed, and pretending to take no notice of her brother's amusement, passed on.

"What a charming little piece," said Lady St. Cyprien, over the Duke's shoulder.

"Ah! here is Mr. Mayne; perhaps he can decide the artist's name."

A man, square built and of middle height, had joined the group, and with hand-shakes and nods betokened his intimacy with each member of it. The first glance betrayed him for an artist. The brown hair clustering closely about his ears, the flamboyant tie of soft silk run through a cameo ring, the ornately carved piece of amber that headed his walking-stick, were all patent indications of Eliot Mayne's profession. The second glance ameliorated the first impression. His clothes were of the latest cut and fashion, his short beard of strong reddish-brown hair, trimmed to perfection; his hat, gloves, and boots—ever the stumbling-blocks of the exponents of art—were immaculate. He had rather the air and manner of an amateur, or of a man who seeks to cloak some one strong personal characteristic by the assumption of another.

In his world, which as worlds go was sufficiently eclectic, he had made both reputation and fortune as a painter of biblical and religious subjects. He had a great following, and many of his patrons compared him indifferently with Perugino and Bellini, much to his own amusement, for he was a man of humour and had a certain superficial feeling for art.

Out of his studio he posed for a gentleman, and that de-

spite an uneasy doubt that there were flaws in his armour. Women liked him much, men but a little, and his character fluctuated according to whether the chat was held in the boudoir or smoking-room. He came forward, hat in hand, prepared to give his opinion, which he did with a judicious admixture of technicalities.

Lady St. Cyprien's undisguised smile at last checked his flow of words.

"Thanks so much, Mr. Mayne. It's very interesting. But I am sufficiently Philistine not to care in the least who could have painted the picture. I only know the face is the highest ideal of innocent saintliness I have ever seen."

She raised her tortoiseshell-handled glasses and looked long at the picture. "The face is almost too spiritual even for the mother of the Christ."

The Duke nodded a grave acquiescence.

"It is the face of a girl child who is still too young, too pure to know that even virginity exists." Lady St. Cyprien sank into a low chair and looked again at the picture.

"Grandchester, where could I ever have seen a face like that?"

His Grace shrugged his lean shoulders and smiled sardonically.

"My dear Adela, only in the National Gallery. The great Botticelli there is almost identical in feature and expression."

Lady St. Cyprien shook her head.

"No, Grandchester, I have seen that face, living, and smiling—for such a mouth and eyes could never laugh—with red blood flushing the round cheeks, and little sparkles of childlike, innocent amusement coming and going in those serene eyes." She puckered her pencilled brows in an effort of recollection. "Where did I see that face? It was but a few days ago."

The Duke, with a gallant air which conceded much to the fair sex, shook his head.

"You have been deceived by a mere outline, a chance scheme of colouring, my dear Adela. The women of the end of the century are beautiful, no doubt—but saints—" and Lady St. Cyprien being a married woman and a relation, the old Duke winked one eye at Eliot Mayne and chuckled.

"Is grandfather back yet, Martin? I want to show him —Oh! I beg your pardon." The clear fluty voice of a young girl had spoken from the outer shop, and only died in an inarticulate murmur at the entrance of the gallery.

Lady St. Cyprien turned sharply round and found a tall, slight figure, that of a half-grown girl of about fifteen, standing almost at her elbow. The child wore a simple gown of fine white wool, shirred at the throat and wrists and falling in straight folds over the budding bosom and slender hips almost to the ancles. A flat hat of golden-hued Leghorn straw was tilted back from her face and permitted the sinking sun to fling fierce rays across the flawless velvet of her fair skin and the pale yellow locks that curled about her long throat. In her hands was clasped a loose bunch of wine-coloured roses which half in shy doubt she still held out towards her grandfather.

"Ach! it is you, my child," said the old man, scarcely turning his head. "Go upstairs, my dear, I am busy."

With a simple little curtsey the young girl was about to obey, when Lady St. Cyprien dropped her long eye-glasses with a sharp clatter and said:

"Surely that is little Mary Levinge. Come and shake hands, my dear. Why, how you have grown since I last saw you, which was just before you went away to school."

"I remember you quite well. You are Lady St. Cyprien." The young girl spoke with directness and modesty, but the instinct of self-humiliation which centuries of persecution

have engendered in her race was entirely absent from her manner. She held out her hand with charming candour to the great lady, who on her part clasped it warmly.

"Yes, I am Lady St. Cyprien. Ah! Duke, you would like to know this young lady. This is the Duke of Grandchester, my dear."

The old gentleman bowed before the little Jewish maiden as though she had been a princess. Then he touched Lady St. Cyprien's arm and whispered:

"There is your Virgin's face—the likeness is extraordinary."

"Of course; I passed the child in the street the other day. Besides, I remember noticing the strange resemblance when she was quite a little thing."

"Your ladyship sees how like the child is to the picture?"

It was old Levinge who spoke. Sybilla, Countess of Windover, having bought for her own price an exquisite Sèvres cup worth twenty-five guineas, was in a charming humour and only too ready to praise everything.

"La! what a lovely child!" she cried in her most masculine tones; and then added in a loud whisper: "Gracious! Adela. What a peculiar likeness. 'Pon my word, I never saw anything so remarkable."

Vexed as he was that his patrons should lay such emphasis on the strange resemblance which existed between his grand-daughter and the imaginary portrait of a woman who is less than nothing in the eyes of a good Jew, old Levinge could no more resist the temptation of showing off the child's undeniable beauty than he would have stayed himself from reciting the attractions of anything in his shop.

"Take your hat off, Mary, and let the ladies see what pretty hair you've got."

Without a blush of embarrassment Mary removed her hat, and lifting her hands, which had the long, slightly

turned-back finger-tips and narrow almond nails Crivelli loved to paint, held them finger to finger and palm to palm across her breast as did the pictured saint at her shoulder.

"Divine!" murmured Mayne, his brown eyes ablaze with undisguised admiration.

"The picture is a Botticelli," cried the Duke, with his eyes fixed on Mary. "Your grand-daughter might have sat to him."

"Yet Botticelli never painted it, your grace. Everything goes to prove that the picture is a mystery."

"And the likeness wonderful," said Sybilla, Countess of Windover, shutting her gold lorgnette and preparing to go. "Grandchester, Adela, are you coming? Good-bye, Mr. Mayne."

A moment later the gallery was empty save for the child, with her long eyes narrowed beneath her drooping lids, her plaintive hands and her mouth full and dewy as that of an infant, yet sad and set as that of a woman, stood there, a pale wraith in the gathering summer twilight.

The return of her grandfather and the switching on of the electric light roused her from her dream. The old man drew a greasy black skull-cap from his pocket and putting it on began to mumble in Hebrew his evening prayers, now and then pausing in his devotions to fling curt instructions to Martin Baird, who, with the door of the safe yawning wide behind him, was making up the day's accounts.

"Mary, go upstairs and tell your aunt I am coming up," Ephraim said presently.

Mary picked up her hat and her roses, then crossed to where the grey-haired manager sat before a pile of books.

"Good-night, Martin," she said. "Would you like a rose?" She stooped to lay one on his desk. "Martin," she whispered, "did you hear what Lady St. Cyprien and

the others said about me? It must be true if strangers notice it. Good-night."

With a nod and one of her vague smiles she flitted across the gallery and disappeared through the door behind the arras.

CHAPTER IV

The rooms above the art shop, where Ephraim Levinge lived with his widowed daughter Judith Marx and his grand-daughter Mary Levinge, were small, and extraordinarily suggestive of the business carried on downstairs. The sitting-room, which was on the first floor and looked on to Bond Street, and old Ephraim's bed-room behind it, seemed as though they had been caught in periodical high tide of *objets d'arts*, which on receding into their proper channels had left behind them, while sweeping away familiar friends, sundry relics of the overflow.

As far back in her fifteen years of life as Mary could remember, the rather shabby furniture of her home had a queer trick of being supplemented and overwhelmed by fine silken-coloured chairs and polished tables she scarcely dared to touch. The Japanese bronzes on the mantelpiece would be transformed in a single night into huge Worcester vases of royal blue, besprent with roses and peacocks. Sometimes Aunt Judith would loll at her ease in her dirty plush tea-gown on a grand French chair with gilt arms, and a week later would be forced to seek repose on a narrow-seated, straight-backed empire sofa.

At first the child, with the "homing" instinct which all young animals possess, was troubled by the perpetual alteration in her surroundings, and though the bedroom she shared with her aunt was seldom if ever molested, it frightened and troubled her to see the familiar landmarks of her baby days forever changing.

She was five before she connected the visits of her grandfather's friends with the sacrificing of her own household gods.

"Now that's a nice couch, a very nice couch," had said a burly son of the priestly tribe of Cohen one day, when calling on Ephraim Levinge.

"Yes, it's a good sound thing that—rosewood, stuffed with the best hair you ever saw—and the brocade! Well, just feel it."

This Mr. Cohen proceeded to do, and then to the child's astonishment opened a long and keenly fought argument touching the price. At the end of a quarter of an hour both men wiped their foreheads.

"I send the money and a cart to-night," said Mr. Cohen.

"But you mustn't send that away," had cried the child, springing from the floor and dropping her toys. "That's Aunt Judith's favourite sofa."

The two Jews laughed—but by next morning the sofa had gone, and Aunt Judith was reduced for some time afterwards to a fifteenth century oak settle.

From that day Mary discovered that everything had a price. Modern or antique, whole or broken, there was nothing which was not to be bought—and sold. Thoroughbred Semite as she was, born of a long line of Polish hucksters, who had chaffered and bargained in every town of central Europe, her nature was streaked with a peculiar distaste for the taint of the mart. She had an innate reverence for the things of dead great men and forgotten lovely women. Her temperament was of too highly organised and neurotic a type, her imagination too much thrown back on itself by lack of sympathy and companionship, not to seek their favourite food amid the thousand objects of value and interest around her. Where a healthier-minded child would have found infinite joy in

dismembering a box of toys, little Mary Levinge would curl up on the floor at the foot of a great bureau or ample chair, and would weave a thousand vague romances about the man or woman who might have owned it. With the acquisitive faculty of her race, she very quickly picked up the essential points of periods, and marks of furniture, pictures and china.

Knowing little of her own great faith beyond the merest outward forms, her receptive brain had absorbed to the full the strange jumble of the world's legends, which she had gathered either from the lips of Martin Baird—himself a man of dreams—or from the vastly indiscriminate reading with which he had supplied her. Perhaps with a vague idea of some day converting her to Christianity, he had taught her to read out of the two Testaments; an exercise which, being strictly forbidden, the child intuitively loved, even as she grew to cherish the wonderful story of that pure woman, whose name was unmentionable in Levinge's house, beyond the threshold of the Art Gallery, where Holy Virgins were relegated to the merely commercial level along with Lancret's Frenchified madames and Lely's loose-vestured and lax-moraled beauties. Always with a view of amusing the lonely little girl, Baird had told her a thousand times the old Norse and German legends; the gipsy stories of Hungary; the lives of the saints; the glowing tales of the East, till the child evolved her heroes and heroines from a confused tangle of yellow-haired sons of Odin and ivory-skinned princesses of Italy, of Roman maidens martyred at the stake for a new faith's sake and gallant Paladins.

Mary's aunt, Mrs. Judith Marx, whose youthful days had been passed in hawking cheap jewellery through the Ghettos of old German towns, was, in her later years of ease and comfort, too utterly given over to a sloth, which only partially disappeared at meal-times, to know or care

how the little girl was to be educated. So long as Baird or a servant would keep the child amused and quiet, Mrs. Marx was content. The only offspring of a long-dead scapegrace son, the baby Mary had almost been flung into the arms of Ephraim Levinge at that moment in his career when he was shaking the dust of a nomad life from his feet, and settling down as a wood-carver and maker of antique oak in a slummy alley off Petticoat Lane. Perhaps the frail waif with the sweet, serious eyes, and set full mouth that never cried, who had been despised because she was born a woman, brought some measure of luck to the old man. Life had been bitter with him; the hands of many had been against him, and his hand against all; but the Jew is generally good to his own, for the ties of blood are with him his single bond with the rest of humanity.

So Ephraim Levinge, terribly poor as he was in those days, was kind in his hard, narrow way to the child, and, as she grew older, and his business improved, he was not without ambition for her. When she could talk, he moved from the squalid nest of his compatriots into more decent quarters in North London. He revised to vanishing point Mrs. Marx's list of acquaintances, and forbade that garrulous slut to let his grand-daughter run the streets or mix with the child-life she would meet there.

Then came a lucky deal or two. A rage set in for old oak, and with a courage which astonished himself, Ephraim took a small shop in Bond Street, letting out the upper part and still living at Islington. The carved settles and chests soon led to investments in old masters of nebulous origin, and little bits of china from the neighbourhood of Frankfort, and by the time Mary was five, the dark shop had blossomed into the "Art Gallery" and "Ephraim Levinge, Art Dealer," was painted in gold above the huge plate-glass window.

The marvellous instinct for art which is co-equal in the Jew with the capacity for trading, soon taught him to know the real thing from the false, and where to place it, and when once he had grasped the advantages of honesty, he became the acknowledged art dealer of the great world. The sale-rooms of London and Paris became familiar with his squat, awkward figure and hawk-like face. He trailed his frowsy coat and incomprehensible lingo alike through royal palaces and the boudoirs of *les petites dames*, buying and selling everywhere. The sums of money he frequently risked were enormous, and sometimes frightened this man who had begged his way across Europe; but they always came back, the golden sovereigns and the rustling bank-notes, bringing more with them.

His galleries, filled with the masterpieces of centuries, became the *rendezvous* of the fashionable world. Art collectors hobnobbed with Levinge; critics consulted Levinge; authorities required confirmation from Levinge; duchesses gossiped away their mornings with Levinge; and their lords considered ways and means with him.

Wealth flowed in fast, but the old days, when he had tramped pack on back across the Polish snowfields, or starved beneath the Italian summer suns, or lain drenched through with tropical showers behind a stone wall or hedge of vines, had left their traces on his sturdy frame and were recalled in the achings of his big bones. And so when the day's business was done, and the heavy iron shutters had been lowered over the plate-glass windows, when the catalogues of approaching sales had been marked, and the thick green-backed ledgers had been posted up by Baird, Ephraim Levinge was glad to go upstairs and wash his hands and eat, and then, with his hat on his head and his praying shawl about him, mumble a few prayers in his corrupt Hebrew before going to bed.

During these years, when her grandfather was scraping his fortune together, and teaching the rudiments of art to wealthy brewers and globe-trotting Americans, little Mary spent those hours which were not passed in Martin Baird's delightful company, with a Scotch servant, who considered that in keeping the child quiet she was doing her duty. Sometimes, but this very seldom, Mary would be sent to spend the afternoon with the children of her grandfather's business friends, but she was too reserved and thoughtful to care for their noise and rough play, and after a time the nurseries of Maida Vale and Notting Hill knew her no more.

So the earlier years of her childhood went by, leaving her nervous, imaginative, and extraordinarily ignorant of everything save a tangle of fanciful tales and a superficial knowledge of idly gleaned facts. Wonderful dreams of knight-errantry were weaved by the little brain which did not know that two and two made four, and the strange names and legends of Eastern gods fell from lips that could scarcely say the alphabet.

But when she was ten, by accident Ephraim Levinge discovered the child's absolute ignorance. At first it made but little impression upon him. Neither his mother nor the wife of his early manhood had been able to read, they had said their prayers by rote, and it had been good enough for them. His widowed daughter, Judith Marx, took months to spell through the greasy, dogs'-eared novels in Yiddish, which she surreptitiously borrowed from a small Jews' lending library in Whitechapel. What did the child want with learning? Yet through his self-persuasion crept the knowledge that since his young days, spent in the Ghettos of Poland, a great change had come over his race, and especially over the women. The streak of Orientalism and the Jew's inbred contempt for all that is feminine was

strong within him, and in his daily prayers he always thanked the God who had made him a man. Yet he was not blind. He had wide eyes and open ears for the present, and the instinct of prophecy for the future. Woman, the scorned and the inferior, was waking from a slumber which had lasted through the ages; why should his grand-daughter, the last of his line, the heiress to his great business and his ever-growing fortune, sleep on in ignorance?

She must be educated by a proper and responsible governess, so Ephraim Levinge announced to Mrs. Marx one morning as he quitted the living-room for the shop below.

Mary was already downstairs, for at the first words dealing with her own future, her shrinking timidity had urged her to fly to the more impersonal company of Martin Baird.

For a moment, after her father's heavy tread had died on the staircase, Mrs. Marx sat as if transfixed in her chair. Then for the first and last time in her life, her slow-working brain, fired with ignorant hatred of the enemies of her people, the unbelievers in the law, roused her indolent body from its normal lethargy, and she went downstairs after her father.

With her black wig askew and her fat, yellow face quivering, Mrs. Marx burst into the Art Gallery.

Levinge was arranging some Chelsea figures in a tall cabinet. Baird was sitting at the writing-table rapidly answering a large pile of letters; Mary, with her hands clasped loosely across her white pinafore, was gazing with reverent eyes at the small picture of the Holy Virign. In the outer shop, the two assistants were cleaning and putting together a beautiful girandole of old cut crystal.

Martin Baird first caught sight of the angry woman. Her disturbed manner as well as her appearance in the Art Gallery warned him that something was amiss. He

rose quickly and closed the big glass doors which separated the shop from the larger show-room.

His action drew on him the first outpourings of Mrs. Marx's wrath.

"Oh, Gentile and eater of unclean things, you had need leave my presence. If I were master here I would not have your shadow cross my threshold. It is owing to you that this last insult has been put upon me and Heaven's lightnings have been called upon this house."

She spoke in Jargon which Baird understood well, and it was in Jargon—which he seldom now used—that Levinge bade his daughter hold her peace.

"Peace! Name no peace to me who see myself driven from my father's house," cried Mrs. Marx turning on Ephraim. "What have I done to thee, O my father, that thou shouldst force me to leave thy roof? Where have I failed in my duty to thee and to the memory of my mother —peace be upon him—? Have I not kept for thee a *Kosher* house? Have I ever failed to light the lamps for *Shabbos?* Have I not observed the fasts and prepared for every feast? Who but I have burnt the leaven at the Passover, and cleansed the knives by fire? Is not the Borsch I make thee good and the almond pudding light? Ah! woe is me!" She flung up her fat hands in a gesture of despair. "You would bring a *Goya* into this house, who would drink milk with the meat and mix the plates."

She paused to take breath, and in the interval her father turned again to his occupation of arranging his dainty china figures. The action was significant of contempt and lashed Mrs. Marx to greater fury.

Her eyes fell upon Mary, who stood shoulder to shoulder with her favourite picture, staring at her aunt. The child could not speak Yiddish at all, but she understood enough to gather that Mrs. Marx's wrath had been roused by the

prospective advent of a governess—who in all probability might be a Christian.

"Ha! thou foolish one," began Mrs. Marx, turning on her niece with renewed vigour, "is it not enough that I should see thy father's daughter reading the New Testament"—and she spat out with scorn—"that thou shouldst not speak the tongue of thy own mother, but only the talk of this accursed country, and that thou shouldst worship false gods?"

A pointing finger indicated the sweet face of the Holy Virgin and drove home the incomprehensible Jargon to Mary's understanding.

"I come not down here much, the Christian and those who are reformed make the place unfit, but I know where thou spendest thy time. Thou adorest the image of one who was a cheat—a mother of lies! Ha! ha!" she snorted scornfully, "those who call her the mother of the Messiah are fool-men—she was the mother of lies."

"Aunt Judith!" screamed the child, her face grown whiter than her frock and her little hands outstretched as though to stay the torrent of abuse.

Baird sprang to his feet at Mary's piteous cry, but Mrs. Marx, with knuckled hands upon her hips, was revelling in the reminiscent abuse of the "Lane" and was not to be stayed.

"Knowest thou not that the Messiah is not yet? That only a true daughter of Judah shall be meet to give him to his people as a redeemer and lawgiver? Hast thou no knowledge of the prophets who have said, 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel?' Look at that face. Thou callest that a picture of the Holy Virgin? Pah!" she spat again, "she was no better than a wretched drab!"

"Silence! Go to thy own chamber," thundered Ephraim

Levinge, while Mary, white with horror and shaking with grief, sank almost fainting into a chair.

So began and ended Mrs. Marx's first and last interference with her father's plans for Mary's future, for Ephraim Levinge had not made half a million of money by listening to the foolish talk of women. Mary would be rich, Mary should be clever enough to keep her riches. She should be educated and—the ambition came to the old Pole in a flash—she should be a lady. He looked at his fat, loose-fleshed daughter. Her flabby, ill-kept skin, her dirty finery filled him with a vague disgust, which merged in a fierce determination that his little grandchild with her golden hair and roseleaf complexion should never degenerate into the typical *Pullack* woman of his people.

He wondered a little at his new purpose, but he never swerved from it. Mary should be taught the ways of superlative order, the perfect pride of person, the exquisite grace and ease of manner, the low clear charm of speech which his natural shrewdness showed him were the hall marks of an English lady.

The handsomest and richest daughter of commerce who ever rustled and jingled into his shop was but an overdressed mass of vulgarity beside old Sybilla, Countess of Windover, whose gold-headed walking-cane, stiffly rolled side-curls, and shabby black gown had a subtle air of distinction which to the Jew was at once indefinable and desirable.

His commercial theory that everything, even the air and manners of a *grande dame*, had a price, and Mrs. Marx's iterated horror of a governess in the house resulted in Mary being sent to a first-class school, where her gentleness and beauty at once placed her on a level with the sprigs of English and foreign Jewish aristocracy who were being educated there.

If education and companionship quite failed to cure Mary of the habit of indiscriminate day-dreaming, it served in some slight measure to regulate and formulate her baby ideals, which one by one dropped from her, as premature blossoms fall from an undeveloped tree. Yet some remained with her, and one before all, set to a fruit, and grew with her growth till it became a very part of her.

The religion of the Holy Virgin, that undefiled House of Gold, that unbroken Vessel of Honour, that Queen of Virgins whose light was the Morning Star, whose ensign was a Lily that had led the fiercest war and carried the sweetest peace among all nations, was to the little Jewess even more than a beloved fairy-tale of the nursery.

For, despite the fact that the articles of her ancient faith, the grand prayers in the sonorous Hebrew tongue, and the magnificent ritual of her Church were taught her, that forbidden story, that savoured all the sweeter in that she might not taste, grew yet more dominant in her, until it possessed her like her soul.

That the Madonna's Child, born nearly nineteen hundred years ago, was that Redeemer the prophets of old had promised to the Jews, every tenet of her own vaguely understood religion forbade her to believe, but that such a Redeemer should arise from among the scattered tribes of Israel who should lead them to the Land of Promise, and make of the units one grand nation, was with her an established article of sincerest faith.

Had not even Aunt Judith told her of that humble Jewish family, living out their dull peasants' lives in the heart of the dim Hungarian forests, a woman of which the faithful Jews of Eastern Europe say will be chosen as a meet mother for the expected Saviour?

Over her lessons, and in the midst of her play in the shady school garden where the tall white lilies grew in

silver lines against the old wall, Mary would wonder and dream about that poor peasant woman who was to be so blest.

She saw one day some gipsy girls, swarthy, black-browed wenches with tangled ebon locks tumbling into their big bold eyes, and thick brass rings set with coloured glass dangling from their ears at either side of their bare brown throats. The Romanys whined and begged about the garden gate, cringing with outstretched dirty claws to the girls in their neat school dresses.

A governess told the girls the women were gipsies who had wandered across Europe from beyond the forests of Hungary and Bulgaria. "Some people believe the gipsies are really the two lost tribes of Israel," she told her pupils.

The memory of the coarse beauty and degraded bearing of these outcasts of her own race filled Mary with a vague disquietude. All unconsciously she had built her unformed faith in a redeemed future round the picture of the pale-haired maiden which hung in her grandfather's Art Gallery at home. It was a childish inconsequential thing to have done, but it had grown to be a part of her being for so long that she could only think that such a woman, with such calm brows, such serene meek eyes, and a mouth formed for the expression of many sufferings, could alone be hailed as "Mother" by the child who was one day coming to redeem her people.

Mary did not voice her beliefs to her teachers. She could not have done so, for, with all her brooding, they were so intangible, so vague, so essentially prohibited, that she could not put them into words even to herself. Only when she closed her eyes, as in a cloudy vision, the past as she had understood it, the future as she imagined it, swept across her brain. In words the child's ideas would have been grotesque; and perhaps it was an undefined fear that she would be laughed at, which kept her silent.

For five years she lived her quiet school life, never once returning home. Too dreamy to be really clever, said her teachers; too delicate to work very hard, said the doctors. Then her grandfather had her home again. Ephraim Levinge was growing very old; his sturdy peasant frame was giving signs that soft lying and good living in later years could not wipe out the traces of starvation and hedgerow beds; and he longed with all the softness of his hard old heart for the nearer presence of the last of his kin. So at the most critical moment of her life, when the soul of a young girl first stirs to waking in her still childish body, when the heart sickens at a doll and the brain cries out for more light, Mary came back to the great Art Gallery and the crowded upper rooms, which were so filled with the relics of a buried past that there seemed no place for the creation of a fair future.

CHAPTER V

The shop and Art Gallery had been shut for over an hour, and already the sitting-room upstairs was close with the odours of antiquity, drawn from a full suite of oak and tapestry furniture by a couple of oil lamps. The glare of the lights, scarcely subdued by two cheap ground-glass globes, filled the small room, and mercilessly showed up the rents in the tapestry, the scratches in the oak, and the faded gilding of a broad-faced empire clock which ticked solemnly in the corner.

It was late one Saturday afternoon, the Sabbath was over, and Levinge, wearing his shabby tall hat, and with his *Talith* hitched round his shoulders, was seated in a distant corner mumbling his prayers.

Stretched in animal ease on the tapestry sofa was Mrs. Marx, her large flabby form draped in the usual untidy tea-gown, her black wig profusely greased and tousled into stringy curls above her low forehead, and her fat hands laden with rings and tipped with dirt. One of her everlasting cheap Jargon story-books poked a dog's-eared corner from beneath the cushion where she had hastily thrust it on her father's entrance. She only obtained these books on such rare occasions as she was able to slip away and spend a few hours among her old-time friends at Whitechapel, for Judith Marx had the intelligence of a child, the instincts of an animal, and was never so happy as when she was jabbering her barbarous lingo to a score of her compatriots, and eating fried fish or *Crepleh*, the rich

meat pasties, with her jewelled fingers. Of her old father, with his ambitions, his marvellous trading powers, his (to her mind) reckless trafficking with Christians, she was proud, but very much afraid. She still obeyed him as an inferior bows to a higher power, and if she was dirty, greedy, and lazy, it was merely because he had ceased to correct her on these points.

Her feelings towards Mary were more complex, if such a mass of insipidity can be accredited with either feelings or complexity. As regarded her niece's silent moods, her strange flights of fancy and mysticism, and even the more solid foundation of her expensive education, Mrs. Marx frankly said she could not understand her. She viewed with horror the unfettered license of literature which Martin Baird engendered in the child, and which Ephraim Levinge had never checked. She could never fathom her father's motives with respect to Mary, for her own girlhood had been passed in almost Oriental particularity. Yet she saw little Mary, on whom she knew the old man doted, brought up with an exceptional freedom of speech and action.

Another, who for all his knowledge of Ephraim Levinge's character and ambitions, could not quite grasp his intentions with regard to the child's future, was Martin Baird. He not infrequently spent Saturday afternoon and evening with the Levinges, sometimes in the over-furnished sitting-room, but more often at his desk downstairs, going over the green-backed ledgers, marking catalogues, or valuing stock with his employer. To-night, however, Ephraim was expecting a few friends to play cards after the evening meal, and the iron safe had been locked for good at four o'clock that day.

The unshaded light was very merciless to Baird. It made every white hair on his temples and just above the

ears shine like silver. It insisted upon every wrinkle on his pale face, it robbed his secretive lips of the red of life and touched them with the bloodless hue of asceticism. His toil-worn hands were like wax against the dark plush table cover, and in the stillness of the close room, he sat so silent and bowed that old Ephraim, as he took off his hat and "Four Corners," and peered over the gold frames of his spectacles, thought that Martin looked old—very old.

"Where is Mary?" he inquired, putting his hat on a Boule table.

"She is with the Montagus," said Mrs. Marx in Yiddish. "Rose Montagu came with her maid this afternoon, and asked if she might go to Portland Place. Her father and mother will bring her home this evening."

Mrs. Marx arranged and slopped our her words in the same untidy fashion as she put on her clothes. Her thick tongue and guttural enunciation became more pronounced when she spoke English, which she hated having to do, but which, since his grand-daughter had returned from school, old Levinge had instituted as the home language.

Ephraim Levinge evolved the meaning of Judith's vague speech, and nodded his head. He was sparing of words, for he knew the value—and the cost—of an indiscreet phrase, but he allowed a gratified smile to wrinkle his mouth.

He was pleased that the Montagus should have taken notice of the child. Benjamin Montagu was the wire-puller of the money-lending business. Every man—and many women too—of the English aristocracy had climbed the stairs to Ben Montagu's little office in Pall Mall. He held the fate of a hundred great families in his podgy white hands, he could drag princes from their pedestals if he chose, and mar more marriages than ever are made in a season. But Ben Montagu was a good-natured fellow in

the main; as he was strong he was merciful, and much would be forgiven to the "smart" young man who would dine in Portland Place once in a way, or consent to be seen with his handsome wife and daughters in their box at the opera.

Ephraim Levinge was perfectly well acquainted with the anterior history of Benjamin Montagu. He knew just how clean his hands were, and what sort of documents he preferred to have in his enormous iron safe. He knew that Benjamin Montagu was more than anxious to acquire another fortune by marrying his twenty-year-old son, Lionel, who was one degree removed from a congenital idiot. But he also knew that a number of very good people ate Mrs. Montagu's dinners and drank Mr. Montagu's wine, and that his pretty grand-daughter would meet on equal ground, at their house, many of the best men in London, and also the pink of Jewish aristocracy, such as the sons of the great Frankfort bankers, Van Praag, and the co-heirs of Lucas Israels, the thrice millionaire of Amsterdam. Young Eugene Cohen was another frequenter of the Montagu household. There had been gossip about Mrs. Montagu and Eugene at one time, but now Rose and Linda were coming out, and Mrs. Cohen, Eugene's mother, was known to be on the lookout for a wife for her soldier son. So with the certainty that at the Montagus', or among their wealthy friends, Mary would meet a suitor worthy of her beauty and her fortune, the old man nodded his head and wrinkled up his mouth into a smile once more.

Nine struck from the gilt empire clock.

"Get the card-tables ready, Judith," said Levinge.

A game of cards was, with the exception of food, the only thing that ever roused Mrs. Marx into a semblance of activity. She slowly rolled her bulky form off the sofa, and, assisted by Baird, drew out and prepared a table, passing

her fat hands lovingly over the cards, and letting the carved pearl counters drop one by one with a subdued tinkle from her fingers.

Once a month it was Ephraim Levinge's custom to receive a few friends for cards and a quiet chat. The evenings were generally intolerably dull, especially for the ladies; but the men who came usually transacted a little private business, or passed among themselves scraps of information which it would have been indiscreet to write. Since Mary had been back from school, a new element of interest had pervaded the gatherings. There was not a Jew in the community who did not know that Ephraim had built up a large fortune, and that beyond an annuity to Mrs. Marx, the whole of it was willed to his grand-daughter; and though most of Levinge's guests would not have paraded the card parties in Bond Street among their social engagements, there was not one of them who would have demurred at fingering—by marriage—his fortune.

The Montagus, bringing Mary with them, were the first to arrive. Mr. Benjamin Montagu was sanguine of complexion and red of hair. He was short and prosperously fat. His thick gold watch-chain proclaimed that beneath it reposed an excellent dinner. A short moustache alone relieved his face from a likeness to a trumpet-blowing cherub. He wore a constant smile, even in business hours; and his one weak point was an undue partiality for the fair sex.

Mrs. Montagu was dark and very pretty, with the clear olive skin and blue-black rippling hair which belongs to Portuguese women. Her features were delicate and fine, and, unlike most women who have grown-up families, she had preserved the svelte figure of a young girl. As a beauty, she permitted herself a few affectations, the chief of which was a marked lisp, which she had exaggerated with the idea of hiding a very common tribal defect of speech.

She came into the room with her most gracious manner.

"Ah, how-de-do, Mithter Levinge. Tho thweet of Mitheth Marx to let dear Mary come to uth. My girlth are tho fond of her, while ath to——"

Ephraim Levinge looked upon all women as indiscreet, and did not allow Mrs. Montagu to commit herself and her family by finishing her sentence.

"Good-evening, Ben!" he said to Mr. Montagu, who smiled a cordial greeting, while he winced at the familiarity.

Mary glided into the room after the Montagus, and slipped over to Baird. She did not like Mr. Montagu at all; he either chaffed her or paid her compliments, neither of which popular methods of ingratiation she very well understood.

"Martin, let me sit by you all the evening. You don't want to play cards, do you?" she whispered, pulling a chair close to his and sitting down. "Because," she went on, "I want you to tell me all about the great Catherine of Russia, to whom that Sèvres tea-service, that grandfather bought yesterday, belonged. We never learnt much Russian history at school, so I want you to tell me something about it."

The idea of letting the mind of a young girl run riot among the details of a history of Russia and its Imperial family curved Baird's pale face into a rare smile.

"Mr. Isaac Mossenthal," announced the servant.

Mr. Isaac Mossenthal was a man of middle age. A lofty square brow from which the grizzled dark hair was brushed straight back surmounted a pair of small keen eyes. The nose was thick, and the mouth, which was half buried in a black beard, was fleshy, though not unduly so. The characteristic love of jewellery and new clothes was undeveloped in him. In the City he was known as a successful importer of articles "made in Germany," though one of his best speculations had consisted of vast consignments of bath slippers

made in South Africa from dried grass. In Bayswater and semi-Bohemian circles he was known as Mrs. Mossenthal's husband. He had a heart of gold, the temper of an angel, and the manners of a boor.

It was characteristic of 'Sac Mossenthal that once a month he should spend an evening with old Levinge, and typical of Mrs. Mossenthal that on such occasions she should go to bed with a headache. Between the men there existed a slight tie of blood and a strong bond of business. Between Mrs. Mossenthal, who gave Sunday parties at her house in Cleveland Square that included the manager of the Crown Theatre, and the art dealer who lived over his own shop, and who only knew Christians in the way of trade, there could not be even an acquaintance.

Mr. Mossenthal swung into the room with a rolling gait indicative of genial good-nature peculiarly his own, shook his kinsman by the hand cordially, nodded to Baird, professed himself proud to meet Mr. Montagu, touched the slim finger-tips of Mrs. Montagu, who except in Levinge's rooms did not know 'Sac Mossenthal at all, and after patting Mary's smooth cheek, plumped himself down alongside Mrs. Marx, to whom he addressed sundry jocosities in a mixture of German and Yiddish fitted to her intelligence.

The talk was general among the company for a few minutes. Their faces, so different in colouring and expression, yet so markedly similar in feature, grew puffed and shiny in the hot room. Now and then Baird's deep voice rang with bell-like clearness across their thick tones, or Mrs. Montagu's exaggerated lisp was heard. Mrs. Marx and Mary spoke not at all.

But 'Sac Mossenthal had not come out to talk about the financial state of the Free Schools, or the opposition to the proposed new synagogue in Maida Vale. His nervous energy, which found constant recuperation in frequent

snatches of heavy sleep, demanded a perpetual variation of amusement and occupation.

"Here, I say, ain't we going to have some cards? Mrs. Montagu," and he bowed with clumsy gallantry in her direction, "owes us all a revenge. She walked off with everything last time."

Mrs. Montagu acknowledged the compliment to her cleverness with a delightfully infantile giggle, which only half concealed her impatience to begin play at once.

"We must wait for Mrs. Cohen," said Ephraim Levinge. "It's only fair, for she lost so much before."

As he spoke a large Jewess of the most markedly handsome type sailed into the room, and by her presence at once made every one else feel overcrowded. Although she was the mother of a married daughter and a marriageable son, the raven blackness of her elaborately dressed hair was unmarred by a single silver thread. Her heavy features and ivory-tinted skin were lit up by a pair of eyes which still retained their fire, and which in her youth must have been exquisitely expressive and melting. Her huge figure, still heaving with the exertion of mounting the stairs, was emphasised by a light-blue satin bodice fussed over with lace and ribbon, which made Mrs. Montagu's plain black silk look quite dowdy, and Mrs. Marx's purple plush tea-gown atrociously vulgar.

Mrs. Cohen was greeted with considerable *empressement*. She was the queen of the Bayswater and Notting Hill sets, and was the acknowledged link between them and Portland Place and Park Street. She could dine with the Mossenthals and go on to a reception at the Montagus, which circumstance argued a distinctly strong social position. She disapproved of Christians except, perhaps, to help to make a crowd at a dance, and to admit them to the intimacy of the home circle was in her eyes unnecessary, injudicious,

and unorthodox. She tolerated Martin Baird as she might a servant, but would never take a hand at cards if he were included in the game.

"Now we can play," cried 'Sac Mossenthal, taking a place at the table and shuffling the cards with his supple fingers. "What's it to be? Nap, poker—now, Mrs. Montagu, what do you say?"

"I thay Nap," said Mrs. Montagu, forgetting all social distinctions, and dropping into the chair next Mossenthal.

"Now, Mrs. Marx! now, Levinge! come on," said 'Sac, thoroughly in his element, and diving his hand into the pocket of his rather shabby trousers to pull out a handful of gold and silver. "Now Mrs. Montagu, there's a nice little pile for you to win," and he laughed in a wide-mouthed fashion that made the crystal drops of an elaborate George IV. girandole quiver and tinkle.

As the first round of cards was dealt, Mary slipped her small cool hand into Baird's broad palm.

"Talk a little to me, Martin. Tell me something pretty. You have not told me anything for quite a week." She pleaded as a child might plead for a fairy tale, tilting up her small fruit-shaped chin and smiling in his face.

"What shall I tell you about?"

"Tell me—tell me—" she thought a moment, knitting her brows. Then suddenly she flashed her eyes upon him. "Tell me why I do not like going to the Montagus'? They are so kind, and always seem to want to have me with them, but I wish grandfather would let me stay at home. I am so happy here with my books and my stories; those I make myself, you know, out of what you have told me."

Baird looked down at the wistful face fast growing so womanly in its outline.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen! Why, Martin, you know that."

"Sixteen! How time flies. Then if you are sixteen, you are too old to listen to an old man's fairy tales. You must forget such things."

"Fairy tales! Forget! Oh, Martin! Would you have me forget the chivalry of Arthur and Galahad, the Crusaders who fought for their faith's sake, the martyr Maid of Orleans? Must I cease dreaming of the dusky Moors who ruled a kingdom from the Courts of the Alhambra, or of those mighty Teutons who lived among the fastnesses of the Rhine and carved rich kingdoms for themselves out of nothingness? Martin, the stories of art and music are not fairy tales, they are the stories of many of my own people. Great kings, great warriors, great saints, were real. May I not think of them, of their wondrous lives—of their glorious deaths?"

She dropped her voice to a faint whisper, a look of awe filled her eyes.

"Martin, the story of the Virgin is no fairy tale. Would you have me forget that?"

"Mary, my dear, it is time you went to bed," said Ephraim Levinge, without raising his eyes from his cards.

"Good-night, Martin," Mary said, as she left him, and gave a general "good-night" to the card players. She bent her head for her grandfather's blessing, then quietly quitted the room.

"How that child grows!" said Mrs. Cohen, laying down her cards, and with her big ox-eyes noting every swelling line of the young girl's figure as she crossed the room.

Mrs. Montagu grasped the situation at once, and though she was winning, dropped her cards on the table and turned to old Levinge.

"I thuppoth, Mr. Levinge, that you will be looking for a huthbande for Mary thoon?"

"Oh, surely not yet!" cried Mrs. Cohen, pulling herself

together, and guessing at the motive which had induced Mrs. Montagu to come out in the dowdy black gown.

"Mary is more than sixteen," interposed Ben Montagu, ranging himself on the side of his wife and prepared to fight for his own. "I married Mrs. Montagu on her sixteenth birthday."

Mrs. Montagu grew scarlet, Mr. Montagu purple, and Mrs. Cohen sailed in triumphantly.

"Ah, but you forget in England such things are not done. Seventeen is quite soon enough for a girl to be married."

The hit at Mrs. Montagu's suspicious origin was palpable. Mrs. Cohen pursued her advantage.

"And twenty-five for a man. Now my Eugene will be twenty-five next January. Come, Mr. Levinge, why not make a match between the young people?"

Mrs. Cohen brought the full battery of her fine eyes to bear on the old man, who glanced sharply at her from between his gold-rimmed spectacles and his heavy brows.

"But I do not think that Mary hath ever theen your thon, Mrs. Cohen," cried Mrs. Montagu, determined to die hard.

"Young people should be allowed a certain latitude," added Ben Montagu, following his wife's lead.

"Now our thon Lionel thimply doath on Mary. He callth her hith little friend; it'th quite too thweet to thee them together," gushed Mrs. Montagu, lisping more than ever.

"Mary is a good girl. I dare say she is kind to the poor lad," said Mrs. Cohen, firing another shaft into the Portland Place camp.

This reference to the Montagu's afflicted son was a cruel cut; and old Levinge, who saw signs of a serious difference between his guests, thought it was time to interfere.

"My grand-daughter won't be able to marry until she is eighteen. I have willed it so. Mrs. Cohen, what do you go?"

'Sac Mossenthal, who during the pause in the game had snatched a refreshing sleep, started up in his chair, glanced at his cards, and cried:

"I go Nap."

The game went on.

Baird, with his big lean hands shielding his eyes from the lamplight, stared across to where the card players sat. He noted how bent and old and feeble was Levinge, the grey shadows about his mouth, the palsied tremble of his knotted hands. He saw the animal indifference of Judith Marx, her gross face only waking to life as the coin piled before her grew or melted. He guessed the plans which were weaving in the brains of the two women. Mrs. Cohen would deem any girl fortunate who could call her handsome scapegrace son, husband; and Mrs. Montagu, who longed for a rich daughter-in-law to support her social claims, her girlish prettiness being somewhat shadowed by an idiot son, and the unbusinesslike extravagance of a faithless spouse.

Then Baird thought of Mary—Mary with her child's heart and her white soul, with the halo of absolute innocence about her brows, and the visions of dead centuries in her calm eyes. He thought of the shadow of great wealth which hung above her, and of the snares her own people would set for her feet, and he sighed.

Downstairs in the dimly lighted Art Gallery, Mary stood before the Virgin's picture.

"He told me to forget," she cried. "To forget everything, to forget you, dear lady. Some memories might fade, but your story—ah, how could that? Whenever I look in the glass I see you. Every time they call me they speak your name. When strangers see me here, they look and whisper and point at you. God took my mother from me, but you—the mother of one whom some men call God—are here. Guard me, keep me, love me with the mother

love I lack; teach me to be like you, let my life be as yours. Oh, mother—mother!"

In an access of hysterical passion the girl flung herself on her knees before the picture. Her straining eyes, piercing the ever-moving shadows, fancied the sweet mouth smiled, and the pale hands reached down and blessed her. With a strangled sob of ecstasy she fell forward in a swoon.

CHAPTER VI

Dr. Noel Marrable's waiting-rooms were always crowded between the hours of ten and two. His patients were principally women, who fluttered and rustled as they clicked their French heels across the broad tessellated hall of the old-fashioned house in Harley Street, and left fragrant memories of their presence in waiting or consulting rooms.

The women who waited with such wonderful patience in the low panelled rooms, with little beyond a fashion paper or a whispered chat to pass the time, were mostly young, and nearly all pretty. Even the plain ones assumed an air of coquettish grace and their freshest millinery when visiting the most fashionable doctor of the day.

Dr. Noel Marrable's fame and fortune had been made five years back, when he had flatly refused to again attend the Duchess of Melton, who had received him on his first visit in a soiled *peignoir* and without her wig. From that hour, to be a patient of Dr. Marrable's was, in the eyes of womenkind, a patent of beauty, fashion, and smartness.

A few great ladies patronised him because he was really a clever physician, but the majority of his admirers flocked to his consulting-room and paid their two guineas for five minutes' chat, because it was the thing to do, and without in the least caring whether he prescribed for their symptoms or not.

Dr. Marrable was the type of man after whom, with the slightest encouragement, women will run. Tall and spare of figure, grave and rather forbidding of face, he yet ex-

haled a strong sense of virility. His hands, white, smooth and firm of touch, were essentially the hands of a man first, and a surgeon afterwards. His manner was sufficiently courtly, but never servile. His features, which, were hard, more from a habit of strong self-repression than by nature, were rugged and large, the short upper lip was generally pressed closely upon its fellow, and his eyes, quick and dark, looked out with an ostentatiously professional glance upon the world. The delicate arch of the high brows and the tender modelling of the full round chin, which like the rest of his face, was clean-shaven, were indicative of passions which required the constant guard of the hard mouth and cold eyes. But saint or sinner, harshly indifferent or professionally sympathetic, Dr. Marrable was an adored personality among women. He was odd—he was the fashion—he was stoically unmoved by the veriest coquette who ever carried her frills and fascinations across his threshold, and that despite the crowning fact that he was unmarried.

Scores of most beautiful women, whose names figured in Debrett or *The Era* or whose millions were quoted on Wall Street, wives, widows, and maids had entered his small, flower-scented sanctum, where the sun shone through panes of old cathedral glass, and the firelight flickered on a hundred rare toys of ivory and silver, had determined to bring this latter-day St. Anthony to their feet. But the loveliest eyes, dewy with an unexpressed desire, the whitest, most dimpled wrist throbbing with a hidden passion, mutely appealed in vain. Yet continued failure served to add zest to the chase, and every week found the crush round his doors growing greater.

"Take my card to Dr. Marrable, and I'll wait in the little ante-room."

The servant bowed low as Lady St. Cyprien spoke, and at once opened for her an invisible door cut in the oak panel-

ling of the hall, which gave entrance to a wedge-shaped passage next the consulting-room.

"Tell the doctor I shall not keep him a moment," said Lady St. Cyprien, sinking into a chair.

But she had hardly spoken when a door at the far end of the room opened, and Dr. Noel Marrable entered. The clear light from a window in the ceiling showed the silver which at thirty-five already sprinkled his dark hair and the clustering lines about his deep eyes, but a rare smile curved his hard mouth, as he advanced to Lady St. Cyprien.

"I thought it was your voice," he said brightly, "and Stansdale, who is here, wasting my time over imaginary complaints, confirmed my suspicions—said that not another woman in the world has a voice like his Aunt Adela."

"Stansdale! is he with you?" Then as she caught sight of the tall young soldier who stood before the fire, she said anxiously, "My dear boy, why are you here? Are you ill?"

Lord Stansdale, straight as a young fir-tree, fair and debonair as an Englishman should be, made a reverence to his aunt.

"My dear aunt, why are you here? Are you ill?"

"Nonsense, Stansdale, I have only come to consult Dr. Marrable—oh! you needn't run away—it's nothing about myself."

But Dr. Marrable looked at the clock and said:

"You must go now, my dear fellow. It's nearly eleven, and Collins said half an hour ago that the waiting-rooms were full. I'll meet you this evening at the club."

"Collins is quite right," said Lady St. Cyprien. "You have a week's patients in the house. That dreadful Mrs. Mossenthal drove up just in front of me. I interrupted her suborning Collins to give her an early turn. Stansdale, wait outside for me, the victoria is there."

Alone, Dr. Marrable at once dropped the warmer manner

with which he had greeted Lady St. Cyprien. Drawing apart the skirts of his severely cut frock coat, he sat down in a wide carved oak chair, and turned his face towards his visitor.

Lady St. Cyprien laughed.

"You needn't put on the professional mask just yet, Noel. Will you never remember that your mother was my girlhood's friend, and that I have dandled you—ay, and scolded you too, a hundred times!" she cried. "I am all right—thanks to you of course—but I want to bring a little friend of mine to see you."

"Certainly," said Marrable, drawing an ivory tablet towards him and preparing to write down the name of his prospective patient.

"Or better still, come in to tea with me one afternoon and meet her. She is the daughter of old Levinge, the art dealer in Bond Street. I take some interest in the child. She is peculiarly lonely in her home life, really striking in appearance, and singularly free from racial attributes."

"And why cannot she come to me?" said Marrable.

"Because I do not think she would. I call her a child, but she is past sixteen, and although lovable and almost weak where her affections are concerned, she has a considerable strain of her grandfather's will power. Also she is shy and nervous—she would not speak to you or tell you anything if I brought her here."

"Her complaint?" said Marrable, laconic and on the verge of boredom.

"My dear man, if I knew I shouldn't trouble you. The girl is full of fancies—but not whimsical, you understand. She is too sweet-natured for that. She has a trick of fainting too, and is also prone to introspective musings. If she had a mother I should not trouble about her, but she is at a critical age, when the woman is evolved from the girl, and

it would be a pity if she grew up as neurotic and mentally undisciplined as so many of the present-day young women."

Dr. Marrable rose before he spoke.

"I dare say Miss Levinge—if that is her name—is merely a little anæmic and hysterical. It's extraordinary how highly strung some of these Jews are; many of them are literally at snapping-point. Why, those waiting-rooms of mine are half full of the 'chosen people' at this moment."

"Doctor, I'll take your hint, and leave you to your patients. When will you come to see your new one?"

"Next Wednesday at five. Good-morning."

Five minutes later Lady St. Cyprien with Lord Stansdale was bowling across Cavendish Square.

"How is my uncle?" began the young guardsman.

"Very well indeed, and anxious to congratulate you on your captaincy. Won't you come in to luncheon to-day?"

"Thanks, I shall be delighted." Then after a pause he said, "Aunt Adela, who is that pretty child who drives with you sometimes? A very fair girl, with charming eyes?"

Lady St. Cyprien smiled.

"Oh! so you've noticed her, have you?"

"No one could help it, there's something awfully striking in her appearance."

"You are right. Mary is pretty, very pretty, with just that air of appealing helplessness, which, if women only knew it, has the most irresistible attraction for men—who are men. But, my dear boy, she has another charm, besides her yellow hair and sweet eyes. She is—or will be—enormously wealthy."

Lord Stansdale laughed.

"And where did you find her? No one I ever come across can even guess at who she is. Don't say she is an American, and that you are going to 'exploit' her."

"Good heaven! no. St. Cyprien would never hear of such a thing. The little girl is the grand-daughter of Ephraim Levinge."

Lord Stansdale turned round in the carriage, and regardless of manners stared in Lady St. Cyprien's face.

"Ephraim Levinge!" he cried. "Then the girl belongs to a shop and is a Jewess."

"Certainly," replied Lady St. Cyprien very quietly. "Now, my dear Stansdale, it is no use your looking shocked. I and your uncle have known Levinge for fifteen years, first as a clever workman, then as that still rarer thing, an honest art dealer. It was Levinge who saved St. Cyprien from making a fool of himself over that forged piece of Henri II. ware, and it has been entirely under Levinge's guidance that our art collection has been made. Of course he is a Jew—the most despised of his race, a Polish Jew. No one knows his real name, or even whether he has one, but he has always dealt fairly by us, and saved us from being swindled by others of his class."

"He may be a good tradesman, and all that—probably is," said Stansdale, his handsome, fair face expressing involuntary disgust—"but I don't see that even that justifies you in taking the child, pretty though she be, about with you."

"Your uncle is the best judge of that," said Lady St. Cyprien, drawing herself up with dignity. Then her face softened, and she gently laid a hand on one of the young man's.

"Ah! my dear, cannot you understand what it means to St. Cyprien and myself to be childless? You have been his ward, you will be his heir, but you are not our own son. We are not young any longer, and we want a daughter about us, some one with a sunny smile, a sweet low voice, a light footstep. One day, Stansdale, you will marry, and

your wife and your children will be half ours. Till then, you must let me keep my little girl, as I call her."

Silence fell between the two, as the carriage swept down Great Cumberland Place and into the Park. Only Stansdale pressed the hand of this woman, whom he had known since his babyhood as a great leader of society, whose word was law, whose favour was accounted almost Royal, and yet whose loveless heart yearned over a girl child of an alien people, whose empty arms clung round the frail support of an old Jew's grand-daughter. Presently Lady St. Cyprien spoke again.

"No doubt you wonder, Stansdale, why I have never adopted as a daughter one of the many well-born yet poor girls of my own set. But so doing would have entailed the anxieties of chaperonage—a thankless task in these days—and have raised expectancies of settlements and dowries St. Cyprien might not feel inclined to fulfil. With Mary Levinge it is quite different. The child has a beautiful disposition, which has not been spoiled by over-education. Old Levinge, who is immensely proud of her, has made her his heiress, and has even bought the house in which she will live after his death. She wears little cotton gowns and goes afoot unless I take her driving, at present, but that is Levinge's way. When he dies, she will be mistress of herself and half a million of money. Her fortune and her beauty must make her a personage in any society she may drift into. Her own people will be certain to try and catch her and her heritage, but she is too good for them. She should move in higher circles than those of what is called Hyde Park. She should marry a great artist or poet, some one could understand her idyllic nature—or—even a man of old family—for in these days the shop is so quickly forgotten, and money gets fumigated in passing through the bank. One day I'll introduce you to Mary.

She will not talk to you much, but she will look at you with those eyes of hers, that always seem to see through and beyond you, and she will probably invest you with the attributes of a Galahad or Lohengrin. She is a very strange child."

CHAPTER VII

After Lady St. Cyprien's explanation, Lord Stansdale ceased to be astonished when he saw Mary Levinge seated in the high-hung family barouche, and gave up his time to thinking what a pretty child she was. One day he noticed —with the trained eye for femininities which is part and parcel of a young man in society—that the child's flowing hair was bound into a soft knot at the back of her head, and that as she followed Lady St. Cyprien from the carriage her slender feet were no longer visible. She was in long gowns, she was grown up, and in the light of that fact Lord Stansdale began to look upon her with a difference.

As Mary grew and blossomed into womanhood the lamp of Ephraim Levinge's life began to burn very low. For two years past the business had practically been managed by Martin Baird, the old man only seeing his most valued patrons. All during the winter he had huddled, a breathing mummy, before a big fire in the upstairs room overlooking Bond Street. His bedroom was both warmer and quieter, but he preferred the front room, for from there he could hear the Pactolus tide of London—the river out of which he had drawn his fortune—roar, day by day, and could distinguish the abrupt clatter with which carriages drew up before his own door.

As the spring came he moved to the window, but he never got downstairs. During those times Martin Baird came to be like one of the family, for every night he brought up the details of the daily work. Mary, too, was

wakened from her dreams. Faced with practical business, for as evening after evening the big centre-table was spread with ledgers, letter-books, and price lists, the dormant acumen of her race was roused, and the young girl, with puckered brows and pursed lips, would wade down columns of figures and pages of valuations. One night, Baird, distressed by her efforts to grasp an unusually intricate account, tried to draw the book from her, but the old Jew laid his claw-like bloodless hand upon his arm.

"It is full time she should learn, Martin. She will want the knowledge—very soon now."

But he rallied as May fulfilled its promise of warm soft airs and lengthening perfumed days. In May fell Mary's birthday—the day that completed her eighteen years. Friends were expected that evening in honour of the event; not grand people, such as the Montagus or Cohens, but quiet folk, who spoke a garbled tongue which Mary did not understand and who put their hats on for grace. They were toilers from the other side of the city, Russians, Poles, and Germans. They had known Ephraim Levinge in his huckstering and starving days, before ever he took the little child to be his own, and her birthday was the one occasion in each twelve months when Levinge shook hands with the past.

Mrs. Marx, roused from her apathy by the prospect of meeting friends after her own heart, had donned a faded bed-gown, and was busy in the kitchen, recalling the primitive cookery of her youth.

Mary, in the white frock it was her fancy to always wear, was seated with her grandfather, showing him with natural girlish pleasure the gifts she had received.

"See, grandfather, what a lovely ring from the Montagus, and such a pretty fan from Rose. Mrs. Cohen sends me this—she slipped a heavy gold bangle over her

white wrist—"and from her son a scent bottle. I don't know why, for I hardly know him. This—oh! this silver box is from dear Mr. Mossenthal—it was kind of him to remember. The Löwes gave me books, and the Symons a sachet, and Martin—dear old Martin—some lilies."

She dropped her voice and passed her fingers reverently over the great sheaf of Mary lilies she held in her hands.

"What a lot of friends I have, grandfather; how kind every one is to give me presents."

The old man thrust his grand-daughter's little treasures away with a sweep of his shrunken arm.

"Friends! Presents!" he cried, in his quavering voice. "Rubbish, my dear, rubbish. Wait and see what your grandfather gives you before the day is out."

His head sank on his breast again, and he closed his eyes for a moment.

"Please sir, Lady St. Cyprien would like to know how you are to-day, and can she see Miss Mary."

"Go! my dear, go!" said Levinge, rousing himself; and Mary left the room still holding the scented lilies against her heart.

It was early yet, barely eleven o'clock, and the Art Gallery was empty save for Lady St. Cyprien, wearing a gown the silvery tints of which matched her hair.

"I remembered this was your birthday, my child," she said in her soft clear voice. "And as you are quite grown up now, I have brought you what all young ladies should number among their first jewels." She opened a case containing a string of pearls. "Now, no thanks, my dear. Girls wear diamonds nowadays while they are still in short frocks. But I am old-fashioned enough to think that a pretty skin and bright eyes need no such setting. Diamonds should come only after marriage, so till that day

arrives, my dear child, wear the pearls with all my love and blessings."

Lady St. Cyprien drew the girl towards her and kissed her forehead, then cried in a gayer tone, "What lovely flowers!"

"Martin Baird gave them to me," Mary replied simply. "They are Mary's lilies, you know. And as my name is Mary, and I was born in Mary's month, he thought I should like them."

Against her will, Lady St. Cyprien glanced from Mary to the pure pictured face which still held one small corner of the Gallery. The girl followed her eyes.

"I am still like her, you see, Lady St. Cyprien. Sometimes when I look in the glass, it almost frightens me, it is as though the painted face had come between me and my reflection." She stood alongside the picture, as she had done before, and Lady St. Cyprien looked, striving not to see the marvellous resemblance.

Tint for tint, line for line, the faces were alike, and both —the real and the sham—carried the mark of Fate, the premonition of Destiny, the shadow of coming Sorrow. With a little laugh that was almost hysterical, it was so strained, Lady St. Cyprien cried:

"No doubt, my dear, the likeness is there, but you must remember it is merely a chance. There are thousands of pictures of the Virgin in the world to which you do not bear the faintest resemblance. You are too old now to encourage childish fancies, and will have other things to think about. You are very pretty, and will be a young woman of importance. The next few years should be your happiest, and I, my dear child, intend to try and make them so."

Mary scarcely smiled as she answered:

"You are more than kind to me, Lady St. Cyprien, but

you must not think I am ungrateful if I say that I feel sorrow is not far from me now."

She half turned towards the picture and spoke as though addressing it. "I do not think I shall have a very happy life."

Scarcely had the words left her lips than a wild cry—the wail which the untaught woman gives in the presence of death—rang through the house.

Baird dashed across the Gallery and through the private door upstairs. Lady St. Cyprien, with the girl's mournful words still sighing in her ears, turned very pale. Mary stood like stone, only she let her flowers slip in a fragrant silver heap to the floor.

The awful cry was once again repeated, then Baird's voice broke the silence.

"Miss Levinge, your grandfather is dead!"

With unconventional consideration Lady St. Cyprien softly turned away and passed into the street.

The click of the closing door roused Mary from her shocked stupor. She drew herself up, and with the unconscious dignity of a new responsibility, said:

"Lower the shutters at once, Martin." Then she went slowly upstairs, for the weight of her grandfather's birthday gift was very heavy upon her.

CHAPTER VIII

Mrs. Isaac Mossenthal's drawing-room in Cleveland Square was the very perfection of the decorator's art, as embodied by quantities of machine-turned white enamelled woodwork arranged at inconvenient angles, and fragments of limp silk hung from brass rods over unnecessary apertures. Mrs. Mossenthal's reception gown of shot mauve and blue silk was as fashionable as the "period" of her drawing-room, and both were equally unbecoming to the lady, who sat in a precise attitude awaiting her visitors.

It was Mrs. Mossenthal's "At-Home" day, a function which she observed with the important punctiliousness which characterised all her actions. Mrs. Mossenthal was a woman who harboured an idea that in her own world she was a person of considerable importance and power. A fair income, spent with extreme care and study of external show, and a wonderful knack of getting things out of people, had gained for her a reputation for having wealth, and of lavishly spending it. A fine contempt for all of her husband's and most of her own relations had further enhanced her social status in Bayswater.

"She's a Jewess, of course, but you never meet Jews at her parties," was frequently said of Mrs. Mossenthal, and she prided herself on deserving the encomium, for her dinner lists were compiled with a view to keeping the races as distinct as possible, and she openly boasted that she did not keep a *Kosher* house.

Punctually at half-past three a lady of enormous propor-

tions was announced. She was an aunt of Mrs. Mossenthal's, and considered that she would be outraging traditional family affection by not paying her respects to her fashionable niece once a month. She lived in Islington and was frankly provincial.

For a quarter of an hour she cross-questioned Mrs. Mossenthal on family affairs, and then, refusing tea which was tentatively offered her, lumbered heavily away.

"Thank goodness! no one came while she was here," said Rachel Mossenthal to herself. "She is the most hateful old wretch in creation."

Having relieved her feelings, Mrs. Mossenthal again settled her high shoulders squarely against the back of a chair and awaited the next comers. She did not read. She considered it waste of time to read novels, and library subscriptions cost money and made no show. Newspapers were untidy, and moreover she thought it a confession of weakness to study the papers much. A woman with any wits could keep sufficiently *au courant* with the world's affairs by listening to what other people said. The *Times* was left at the house every morning for an hour, and the head-lines were rattled through aloud to Mrs. Mossenthal by an indigent ex-governess who wrote notes, sent out invitations, and executed other odd jobs which were outside the range of a servant's duties.

Instead of reading, therefore, Rachel Mossenthal indulged in thought. With her this was not a mental exercise of a very lofty order. It ranged between a scheme for getting tickets for the opera on Saturday for nothing, to what advantage she could sell the bay cob which had taken to kicking dreadfully, whether her next dinner-party should include the Tauntons, about whose position in the City there were unpleasant rumours, and a little more to the like purpose.

Scarcely were these knotty points settled when callers began to arrive, and the tiny tea-cups, jam sandwiches, and sugared cakes were speedily in circulation.

Mrs. Mossenthal's "celebrities," as she called her theatrical and artistic acquaintances, seldom if ever troubled her on "at-home" days, and the talk that meandered among the pseudo-Eastern cosy corners and early English chimney seats was limited to puerilities.

It was past five before a breath of the outer world entered in the embodiment of Mr. Bertie Chant. He fluttered into the room in a more than usually exuberant and expansive state. His cherubic face glowed with a crude redness which he would have termed "so rudely healthy," but his voluminous scarf and the fresh buttonhole were above reproach.

He held his hat, stick, and one glove shoulder high as he entered.

"Dear lady!" he cried, tripping across the polished floor to Mrs. Mossenthal, who received his elaborate greeting with the mechanical action of the muscles of her hard mouth, which did duty for a smile.

"And Mrs. Cohen, and your daughter, Miss Julia, I declare, looking charming in that toilet," went on Mr. Chant, executing a species of *chassée croissée* over to where Mrs. Cohen and a pretty, young girl, with melting dark eyes and a clear olive skin, sat eating jam sandwiches.

His respects paid, he looked around at the half-dozen ladies who were sitting about.

"Quite a reception, I declare, but then we all love dear Mrs. Mossenthal. But—" here he carefully laid his hat, stick, and glove aside and began to remove his second glove. "You have not heard the news."

"News! what news," said Mrs. Mossenthal, while silence fell upon the room.

Filled with a sense of importance, Mr. Chant's round smooth face expanded into a wide smile, which, as he suddenly remembered the nature of the intelligence he had to convey, reduced itself into an appropriate air of gloom.

"It's about old Ephraim Levinge, the celebrated Bond Street art dealer you know——"

Mrs. Mossenthal's face changed. Her sallow skin turned green, her bloodless lips tightened to a slit. Any mention of her husband's relationship to old Ephraim Levinge—a man who kept a shop—a man who once had the effrontery to tell her that everything "old" in her house was new and in the worst taste—put her in a temper. She made up her mind that if Bertie Chant mentioned the connection, she would never ask him to one of her Sunday dinner-parties again.

"Yes?" exclaimed Mrs. Cohen, setting down her cup. "What about him?"

But Mr. Bertie Chant had his own way of telling a story. He began by putting on a pair of gold-mounted pince-nez, which he considered gave him an air of distinction.

"Well, it is quite a paragraph for the society papers. I shall send it to three to-night. You must know that to-day being the private view at the Decadents' Gallery, I was going, all in my best, you know, down Bond Street, about mid-day. All the 'smarties' go to these shows before luncheon now. The show folk and J——," he swallowed a word and grew alarmingly red, "suburban people make up the crowd in the afternoon. Well, I had just parted from Lord Arthur Carr—such a delightful fellow, we sup together at the Savoy to-night—when I fell, yes, wasn't it shocking? positively fell up against that dear Lady St. Cyprien."

The listening faces grew more attentive, and Julia

Cohen, who had been quietly masticating a sweet biscuit, suddenly became immobile.

"I apologised, of course, and her la'ship, who is quite the most delightful woman in London, was as charming as ever. But when she had received my apologies, she told me —poor dear, quite with tears in her eyes—that she was most upset—she had just been present at old Levinge's death."

"Ephraim Levinge dead!"

"Lady St. Cyprien with him when he died."

"Impossible!"

The last remark fell from Mrs. Mossenthal, who could not resist an incredulous sneer at the expense of the dead art dealer.

Mrs. Cohen noted the expression, and assumed her most Junoesque air. She only tolerated Mrs. Mossenthal on sufferance, and had long ago made up her mind that once her son Eugene was married to Mary Levinge, the Mossenthals should not be included in the visiting list of the young people.

"Not impossible at all, Mrs. Mossenthal," she exclaimed severely. "Ephraim Levinge was much respected among the aristocracy, and I know for a fact that Lord and Lady St. Cyprien held him in high regard."

The reflected glory of a peeress's patronage of a dying Jew was already irradiating the faces of the assembled ladies, when Mr. Chant again spoke.

"Well, I won't quite declare that she was in the room, but any way she was in the house or shop, or somewhere. So sweet of her, wasn't it?"

A drawling voice with a strong twang through it spoke from the vicinity of the tea-table.

"Hasn't Levinge left a grand-daughter, or is there only the rag-bag woman Marx, who can't speak English, left to look after the shop?"

The speaker was a little woman with a long nose, black hair, cut short and curled, and the reputation of being a great wit. She had once written an article for a weekly paper, which after considerable manipulation by the editor had appeared in print. This had given her a great reputation in Hyde Park and South Kensington society, which had been further enhanced by the daring with which she discussed unpleasant topics, under the plea of cultivating what she called "higher philosophy."

A general giggle at Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt's sally relieved the tension of silence.

"Oh, Mrs. Dan!" laughed Mr. Chant. "What a way you have of putting things! Of course there's a granddaughter, eighteen, and beautiful to boot—quite the marriageable damsel, I assure you. Lady St. Cyprien tells me that she has all Levinge's savings and the business, and will be worth every penny of——"

Mrs. Cohen hastily rose. She had no intention of allowing Mary Levinge's monetary value to become the tea-table talk of the community, before she had had time to make plans for an immediate onslaught on such a desirable *partie.*

"Ah, yes, there's Mary—poor child, she must be in great grief—and she will get no help or comfort from that aunt of hers."

"Lady St. Cyprien said the aunt was howling like a Dervish when she came away," said Bertie Chant, "but that Miss Levinge seemed quite controlled."

"She has such a grand character," sighed Mrs. Cohen. "She is a girl for whom I have a very deep and sincere affection. Julia, my love, we must go to Bond Street at once, and if necessary bring Mary away to stay with us, until some arrangement can be made for her."

"But Miss Levinge has a home of her own," said Bertie Chant.

"La, isn't she going to serve in the shop?" twanged Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt.

"You dreadful person!" cried Bertie, flapping his glove at her. "Good gracious, no! Levinge bought and furnished a big house in Regent's Park for her nearly two years ago. She'll move there almost directly, I expect. Oh, it's quite a delightful story for the papers!"

"And play at being the great lady, I suppose," said Mrs. Mossenthal spitefully.

"My dear Mrs. Mossenthal," said Mrs. Cohen, in her most regal manner. "You must remember, we must all remember, that if Miss Levinge—Mary, as I call her, for I have known her since she was a child—makes anything of a marriage, she will not have to play at being a great lady—she will *be* a great lady. I have reason to believe—poor Mr. Levinge had no secrets from me—that Mary's fortune will be a very large one. Now, Julia, my child—Good-bye, Mrs. Mossenthal—shall you wear mourning?"

Mrs. Mossenthal rose stiffly from her chair. She was too rawboned a woman to move with any grace.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Cohen," she said in her cold, high voice, and with her light eyes glistening ominously; "but if Mary Levinge is to go anywhere between now and the time she moves into her new house, she should come here. We are her relations."

Mrs. Cohen was only momentarily baffled.

"But you do not know her, Mrs. Mossenthal, and at such a time a stranger's face——"

"'Sac has known her since she was a child," retorted Mrs. Mossenthal, who was not going to lose the chance of laying the heiress under obligations without a struggle.

"The child will yearn for womanly sympathy," began Mrs. Cohen again.

Then Bertie Chant, who had been discussing the "higher

philosophy," as applied to a recent nasty divorce case, with Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt, turned round and said:

"What's that about motherly sympathy? Miss Levinge will get plenty of that. Lady St. Cyprien meant to fetch Miss Levinge away from Bond Street this afternoon and keep her at Lowndes Square till after the funeral, and her own house is ready for her."

Full of the news they had gathered, Mrs. Mossenthal's guests went away, leaving only Mrs. Cohen to face her hostess in the sham artistic drawing-room.

Both women forgot for a moment their manners in thought. Mrs Cohen, with the tribal passion for accumulating wealth through good marriages burning in her veins, was wondering what reason Lady St. Cyprien, whom she knew to be childless, had for putting herself out sufficiently to take the mourning girl into her house. Mrs. Mossenthal, with envious discontent, was marvelling what advantage a wealthy leader of society could get out of the granddaughter of an art dealer.

One thing they instinctively felt must be done. Their sentiments of affection and love must be conveyed to Mary Levinge at once. Mrs. Cohen wanted her for her son, Mrs. Mossenthal for her own personal glorification. Their claims must be made without delay. Besides, the chance of calling at a countess's house, and perhaps making her acquaintance, was not to be lost.

Mrs. Mossenthal was the less patient of the two, and broke silence first.

"'Sac will insist upon my calling to see Mary tomorrow."

"Shall you go to Lady St. Cyprien's?" said Mrs. Cohen, advancing cautiously and almost smothering the surprise in her voice.

"Certainly," replied the other, tightening all her features

as she spoke. "Bertie said that Mary was to leave Bond Street to-day."

"Yes! it will be the best plan," said Mrs. Cohen in reflective tones, as though she were confirming a suggestion made by herself. "About when shall you go?"

"To-morrow. I think it looks more friendly to go soon."

"Yes! I dare say it does. I never have my horses out in the morning though."

Mrs. Mossenthal never had hers out before luncheon either, but to ingratiate herself with Mrs. Cohen, she would have ordered them out at midnight.

"I will drive you down to Lowndes Square with pleasure, if you like. Besides, as you say, I do not know much of Miss Levinge, and it would be pleasanter to go with you."

Graciously accepting Mrs. Mossenthal's deference as her rightful due, Mrs. Cohen made the appointment for the morrow, and swept downstairs to where Julia was waiting in a charmingly artistic pose on a "Chippendale" hall chair of aggressively modern workmanship.

Mrs. Cohen's first act on getting home was to find out from the pages of Debrett the quantity and quality of Lady St. Cyprien's male belongings.

Mrs. Mossenthal denied herself to any more callers, and spent the rest of the afternoon grubbing out from her wardrobe some "black" in which to pay her condolence visit the following day.

CHAPTER IX

Twice only, according to Judaic law, did the sun set on Ephraim Levinge's dead body, which almost before the breath had left it was laid before an open window. Then when the bath and slab of zinc, brought from the Synagogue, had been used by those near friends whose duty it was to perform the last offices, and when the yolk of an egg had been broken over the quiet old face, a rough deal box half filled with sawdust and scantily covered by a meagre strip of black cloth was carried into the house. After the fashion of the poorest of his compatriots was the millionaire art-dealer encoffined and borne down the ash-strewn staircase away to that vast resting-place of his race, which lies beyond the purlieus of the Ghetto. With rents in every garment and crape upon her head, Mrs. Marx sat *Shivah* and wailed for a week, only staying her noisy grief to eat largely of the food which custom ordains that friends must supply to a house of mourning.

When the eight days were over, life flowed once more into accustomed channels. The pictures which had been turned against the walls were restored to their usual positions, and the mirrors, into which no face may look when the pale angel Azrael has passed through a house, once more reflected the light of day. The great business rolled on again, and it was as though Ephraim Levinge had never been.

Just when autumn's fingers were streaking the great trees in the Regent's Park with orange and gold, Mary Levinge settled into her new abode.

Holmhurst was a big house in the Inner Circle, and all

the summer through the perfume of a thousand tropical blooms floated across from the Botanical Gardens into the windows. A great suite of imposing reception-rooms swept in a circle round the marble centre hall. Upstairs were Mary's rooms, her bedroom and a boudoir, and the two apartments to which Mrs. Marx on arrival at once betook herself, and from which she seldom emerged.

The house was beautifully furnished, with more taste and restraint than is generally found in the homes of self-made men. The sense of living in a bric-à-brac shop which was so evident in Bond Street was wanting at Holmhurst, and though the rooms were filled with priceless marquetries, pictures, carvings, and statues, they were obviously for utility or decoration and not for sale.

At first, Mary, accustomed to the enforced company which is an outcome of living in small rooms, wandered, solitary and lost, through the stately apartments of her new home. She had deemed herself unaffected by the constant "dropping-in" of clients, business men, and old friends of her grandfather, but now she missed the *va et vient*, the scraps of art talk, the town gossip which went on so continuously in the overcrowded Bond Street sitting-room.

Her aunt Judith, freed from parental restraint, now spent her days in a half-clothed, somnolent state. She increased her subscription to the Yiddisher library in Whitechapel, distracted the cook by the eccentricities of her food, and received a small but constant stream of visitors, who preferred to leave by the back door.

Of her childhood's friend, Martin Baird, Mary saw but little. He had been left in the onerous position of manager of the Art Gallery, and felt that no amount of hard work could ever convey the full sense of his responsibilities. Sometimes on Friday evenings, the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, he would leave his beloved ledgers and correspond-

ence to dine with Mary. It had been a custom in the days of her grandfather, and with the tribal clinging to old ways, the girl still wished the habit observed. But do what she would with the outward observance of the Friday evenings, they were never the same as of old. There were no weavings of delightful legends, no scraps of unwritten history, no marvellous stories of missing jewels or unearthed pictures. After dinner, Baird, with his ascetic's face and strong hands, would spread out piles of accounts and sheaves of papers.

"Such and such business had been transacted during the past week. It was advisable that so-and-so should be done during that to come. He had consulted Mr. Montagu and Mr. Mossenthal, the trustees, about this, that, and the other," he would say.

And Mary, with her delicate eyebrows drawn together above her heavy-lidded eyes, and the bow of her mouth pressed to a straight line, listened and questioned, and, as the details became more familiar, ventured to give directions. She was not without the true business capacity of her people, which had only lain dormant for want of exercise. Her slender finger, quaintly ringed with the beaten gold band her grandfather had worn for years, traced a way with incredible swiftness through endless mazes of accounts, and Baird quickly took to relying on her cultivated taste in art with respect to the purchases "Levinge's" was so often expected to make.

If her social responsibilities had shaped themselves as easily as those of business, Mary Levinge would have been quite happy. But here her position was rendered difficult by the absolute uselessness of Mrs. Marx as either an adviser or a chaperon, and by the overwhelming eagerness of some of her grandfather's old friends to fill such positions. Almost in the first days of her mourning Mrs. Montagu and Mrs.

Cohen had displayed unaccountable temper—in Mary's eyes —at the kindly hospitality extended to the heiress by Lady St. Cyprien. The conversation which had taken place in Mrs. Montagu's astonishing blue-and-gold drawing-room in Portland Place, before Mary, who had been invited to "spend the day" there, finally wound up in a covert dispute between the matrons as to which of them should godmother Mary into society after Lady St. Cyprien had done with her.

"But I do not want to go into any society," had said the girl, turning her gentle eyes from Mrs. Cohen's inflamed and angry countenance to Mrs. Montagu's still pretty features.

"Nonsense! my dear," retorted Mrs. Cohen. "A girl with your fortune cannot help herself. I must see if, in consideration of that, you cannot be presented next year. I should be only too delighted to launch you in that respect."

This was a home thrust at Mrs. Montagu, who in spite of her acquaintances among the peerage and her undoubted beauty, had never succeeded in getting to Court.

"I do not thee that any girl need be prethented till after her marriage," Mrs. Montagu lisped. "The nethethity ought to depend on her huthband's pothition."

"I quite agree with you," said Mrs. Cohen, with intention; then, as though it were an after-thought, she added, "but till that time Mary must have some one to take her about."

Mrs. Montagu was the nearest to Miss Levinge, and taking one of her hands, began to pat it.

"I hope she will never forget that Rothe and Linda are her oldeth friendth and that ath their mother I thall alwayth be ready to chaperon her ath one of my own girlth."

"Ah! my dear," said Mrs. Cohen, with a disagreeable

laugh, "I think you will find two girls quite enough to marry off at a time. You had better leave Mary to me."

In a quieter but even more dogged fashion Mrs. Mossenthal had made a bid for the social parentage of the wealthy and beautiful Miss Levinge. She pestered the girl to visit her at The Rosary, a little place the Mossenthals had among the North London hills, and when she refused, paid her long calls in Regent's Park, and harangued her on the ethics of housekeeping and sociology as practised by herself.

The summer and early autumn brought Mary peace, and she was free to take solitary drives out to Hampstead, or dream the long days away in the fragrant shades of her own quiet garden. Only Martin Baird ever disturbed her solitude, for Lady St. Cyprien was away at Homburg.

One day in mid-September, when even the pulses of London were still, and the voices of the children playing in the Park came languidly through the heavy air, Mary, weary, with a vague unrest, of her own grounds, strolled out into the Inner Circle and down the road towards the Botanical Gardens. She went slowly, and her peculiarly graceful walk made her look as though she were gliding along.

With her grey eyes narrowed to an almond shape between her thick white lids, and her mind filled with an old German tale she had deciphered that morning from a rare black-letter book Baird had brought her the previous evening, she wandered on, till a voice at her side said:

"I thought it must be you, Miss Levinge, for I had heard from Lady St. Cyprien that you lived about here; and besides—nobody moves quite as you do—And yet—I was not sure."

It was Dr. Marrable who stood before her, with his glance wandering in undisguised surprise over the spotless freshness of her white gown.

"I do not like black," she said, reading with quick intui-

tion the wonder in his eyes. Then went on: "But what are you doing in London, Dr. Marrable? I thought the whole world was at the sea, or abroad. Were you not staying with the St. Cypriens before they went to Homburg?"

"Yes! and that is the root of the reason which brings me into the wilds of Regent's Park to-day. When I left The Towers last week I promised Lady St. Cyprien I would come and see how you were. She was really disappointed at your persistent refusal to go down to her, and has small faith in young ladies' reports of themselves," he added, with a rare smile.

"And you have come here just to see me? And you look very tired too," said Mary. "Will you not come in with me and have tea in my garden?"

The invitation was sufficiently unconventional, coming from a young girl to a man she scarcely knew, to be startling; only that Mary, with her pure gaze and child's mouth, could neither be unconventional nor otherwise.

As Dr. Marrable followed her too slender, white-clad form on to the sweeping lawn at the back of Holmhurst, and noted the manner in which she gave her orders, and the intelligence, if not brilliancy, with which she talked to him for the next half-hour, he was vaguely conscious that she was different from all other women he had met.

He had known women more beautiful, for, although in shape Mary's face was perfect and free from the rather marked peculiarities of her race, the strange fullness above the eyes and the undecided colouring of hair and skin were undoubted defects. He had known women cleverer, for Mary had neither the gift of society small talk nor the trick of babbling superficial philosophy. But she had a voice like liquid gold, and a mouth that in every curve, expression, and slow-shy smile was like that of an angel.

When he left, and stepped briskly into the cool of the evening down the quiet road, he thought much of her.

"She's like none of them," he muttered to himself. "Neither physically nor mentally. But whether she has a child's soul in a woman's body, or whether her intellect has solved a mystery we grosser mortals cannot fathom, I do not know. She is neurotic, of course; that seems inevitable with a large proportion of the girls of the present generation. She is very delicate. But is that all? I hardly know. She exhales an atmosphere which attracts and yet repels. Her mouth—she has a very lovely mouth—invites anything, everything. Her eyes—they are inscrutable eyes—gaze beyond you into the unseen. Lady St. Cyprien—bless her practical heart—always says the girl is dreaming and a little too absorbed in her own sensations and emotions, and that, once give her a husband, she will develop into the common-sense shrewd woman of her own people."

Dr. Marrable's thoughts had accompanied him as far as his own neat doorstep in Harley Street. He drew his latch-key from his pocket and inserted it slowly in the keyhole.

"That would be a pity. Mary Levinge as she is, is a very interesting person."

He entered his house briskly and shut the door with a bang.

CHAPTER X

The electric light blazed with unwinking brilliancy from the front windows of Mrs. Mossenthal's house in Cleveland Square. A slight sprinkling of snow chilled the air outside, but within, the fires and lights diffused a heat which drew out the acrid odour of the chrysanthemums on the mantelpieces and side tables, and intensified the smell of rich sauces and soups which rose in steamy wafts from the basement.

Mrs. Mossenthal, gowned in white satin which looked harshly clear against her sallow skin, was standing in the middle of her drawing-room buttoning her bony hands and heavy rings into her long *suede* gloves and lecturing her husband, who, wearied out with a long day's golfing in Essex, was already showing signs of dropping to sleep before the fire.

Under ordinary circumstances Mrs. Mossenthal treated her husband's idiosyncrasies with an overt sneer or two, but to-night was the occasion of one of her grand Sunday dinner-parties, and 'Sac could not be permitted to rumple his shirt-front and disarrange his tie so early in the evening.

"Now 'Sac, for goodness sake, try and keep awake for once," she said in her peevish nasal voice, and wrenching viciously at her glove buttons. "We've got a very grand party to-night, and I've ordered a lovely dinner."

"What's there to eat?" said 'Sac, rousing a little and twitching at his collar, which galled him after the day spent in the keen December air.

Mrs. Mossenthal recited the menu, and then said, "Don't you want to know who are coming?"

"Well?" was 'Sac's indifferent query.

"All the best people," returned this wife. "Mrs. Cohen will be wild when she hears about it. I would have asked her if she hadn't said once that she thought actors were out of place in society. The idea of society without actors and celebrities like that." And quite appalled at the thought of such a contingency, she sank—with due regard to her skirts—on the edge of a chair. "But she'll be sorry when she hears that Lady Theo Bellastier is coming." Mrs. Mossenthal glared with her eyes and gave a spasmodic smile with her mouth at the prospect of Mrs. Cohen's discomfiture.

Mr. Mossenthal started from his slumbrous attitude.

"Lady Theo Bellastier! Why, how did you get hold of her?"

"What a disgusting way you have of putting things," sneered his wife. "I didn't *get hold* of her; I invited her. It was the other day when I went to see Mary Levigne, to try and persuade her to come to-night; Lady Theo Bellastier was there, and quite backed me up when I told Mary she ought to begin to go out now, and that certainly she could come to her own relations. Then, as I had talked so much of our dinner-party before Lady Theo, I thought she would be hurt if I did not invite her to come. She accepted directly, and seemed quite pleased—but, 'Sac, mind you make up a card-party after dinner. Lady Theo always expects that, wherever she goes; and you might see that she wins—as it's her first visit. And 'Sac—are you listening? You will have to take her down to dinner, and mind you don't call her Lady Bellastier without the Theo; remember, she's the daughter of a duke."

"All right," said 'Sac good-naturedly. "But who else is coming? Is Mary?"

"Yes! I gave her no peace till she consented. Then, there's Aubrey Delamere, and the Dick Vanes. I hate that Mrs. Vane, she's the most insolent creature, but ever since she found the money for Delamere to take the Frivolity Theatre, she insists on seeing all his letters and overlooking his engagement list, so one can't have him without her. Then there are the Carlton Wests."

"Phew! You've made a mistake there, Ray," said Mr. Mossenthal. "Carlton West hates Delamere; he said at the Green Room Club last week he loathed other actors."

"Oh! but he likes swells and I've put him the other side of Lady Theo, and mind you let him get plenty of chat with her. Delamere will sit next me, so they can't quarrel much during dinner. Mrs. West will have Dr. Marrable."

"That man coming?" cried 'Sac. "I don't like him. Can't quite make him out. He doesn't play golf, and always seems to be dangling at the skirts of you women."

"Dr. Marrable is not a Jew," flashed Mrs. Mossenthal passionately. "He knows how to treat ladies properly and with consideration. Besides, he goes everywhere now, he's got the biggest practice in London. Please don't expose your ridiculous ideas before other people, or you will only be laughed at."

Mrs. Mossenthal was lashing herself into one of her tempers, so 'Sac deemed it best to waive his objections—which were really quite mild—to Dr. Marrable, and profess interest in the remainder of his guests.

"Well! Who else?"

"The Tauntons. We owe them a dinner, you know, and she always looks smart, though goodness knows how she pays for those gowns of her. The Leonard Greenfields, they're going to have a house at Maidenhead next summer, and I want to be asked there. Claude and Oscar Vanstone, one must have plenty of men, you know—and——" for the

first time Mrs. Mossenthal paused in her high-voiced chatter and glanced sideways at her husband.

"Miss Vere Marindin—"

"What!" cried Mossenthal, springing from his chair and pulling his squat form into some semblance of dignity.

"Oh! you needn't fly in a rage," said Mrs. Mossenthal, in her iciest manner, and preparing for war. "I know you don't like the girl, because that old gossip, Levi Simmons, told you something against her."

"She's a horrid woman. Smokes cigarettes before the servants, and tells stories—stories like a man."

"More shame for the men then," snapped Mrs. Mossenthal, with a fine, if somewhat inconsequential scorn. "But Vere Marindin is a celebrity. She paints lovely pictures, I'm sure, and I know Lady Theo Bellastier will like her immensely."

"Well, I won't have her introduced to Mary, mind that." For once 'Sac Mossenthal spoke with decision. Good-natured and easy-going to a fault, he yet had all the Jew's strict notions with regard to his own womankind. Women were of course inferior beings, born for the service and the pleasure of man, but always to be shielded from harm, even as a valuable chattel should be preserved from injury.

Mrs. Mossenthal muttered something about "the fuss that every one made of Mary," but knew from experience that her husband's foot was down.

"Bertie Chant is coming of course. It will be such a grand party for him to write about in the papers."

And then, with her artificial smile and stiff-jointed walk, she moved forward to greet the first of her guests.

The dinnner went off charmingly. Mr. Delamere and Mr. Carlton West—whom no woman with a shadow of tact would have ever invited to sit at the same table—were content with mutually glaring at one another; Miss Vere Ma-

rindin confined her pungent conversation to her immediate neighbours; Mrs. Dick Vane did not audibly criticise the decorations, the guests, or the dinner, and 'Sac Mossenthal did not go to sleep once.

When finally Mrs. Mossenthal caught Lady Theo Bellastier's eye, and the ladies rustled and fluttered upstairs, she felt all the elation of success, which was, however a little damped by the true *mauvais quart d'heure* of a hostess's evening, namely the period which marks the social sepaation of the sexes.

Mrs. Dick Vane, smarting under the sense that Aubrey Delamere had been placed next Mary Levinge, and had payed her effusive attention all during dinner, crumpled the first rose-leaf, by remarking aloud on the somewhat vague style of art which prevailed in her hostess's drawing-room. Mrs. Carlton West and Mrs. Taunton at first joined issue in decrying the taste of modern decorators in general, and the tradesman who had designed Mrs. Mossenthal's rooms in particular, until they started a difference of their own concerning the merits of their respective dressmakers. Miss Vere Marindin introduced herself to Mary Levinge, while Lady Theo Bellastier betook herself to the open card-table, and set herself a solitary and intricate game of patience.

Mrs. Mossenthal's annoyance was making itself unpleasantly visible round her thin mouth and hard eyes, when, with the subdued roar of many voices, the big white folding doors were flung open and the tobacco-scented, black-coated flood of men poured into the room.

The women, with charming smiles on their faces, drew their skirts into a smaller space and revealed unknown possibilities in the shape of seating accommodation.

In the general movement that filled the large room for some minutes, Dr. Marrable found himself standing by Mary Levinge, and looked down at her.

She was as usual in a white gown untouched by any colour—the spotless white of deep mourning. Where it was cut away from her throat and arms it showed the transparent, fine skin of a child, but with the modesty which is so developed in some Jewesses, her bodice was not low, and the birth of her breasts was hidden beneath the jealous silk. The thick strands of her hair gleamed like pale gold under the raw electric light, but her face was pale and bistre shadows ringed her eyes.

"You are not well to-night," said Marrable, after gazing at her for a moment. "You look quite changed from what you did when I saw you last—in September, was it not?"

"I think I am quite well, Dr. Marrable," answered Mary with directness.

"And I think you are not, Miss Levinge," said Marrable.

She smiled faintly.

"This is the first time I have been out since—my mourning. I did not want to come, but Mrs. Mossenthal seemed to wish it so particularly, and Lady Theo said I ought to —and—so——"

It struck Marrable how full of self-abnegation her simple words were, and he wondered if she differed from others of her sex in their supreme devotion to themselves.

"And how do you like us all now you have come out of your shell?" he said, half teasingly.

Mary shot him a little glance, but did not speak.

Marrable looked round the room to find her true answer. 'Sac Mossenthal, his good-natured swarthy face greasy with heat and flushed with wine, was leering boorishly at Lady Theo, who, with the delicious whiteness of her beautiful figure lavishly displayed, was sprawling half across the card-table, and with her *gamine's* mouth wide open was screaming at some pungent witticism of Miss Vere Marindin's. Mrs. Dickie Vane, with tears of rage in her eyes and anger

quivering in her voice, was alternately muttering commands and entreaties to Mr. Aubrey Delamere on the subject of his leading lady.

Mr. Carlton West was expounding the subtleties of his own reading of Hamlet to little Mrs. Taunton, who opnely yawned in his face and said "Yes" and "No" in the wrong place, while she wondered whether her husband would remember to be polite to the Greenfields, who were big City people.

"I am afraid you won't like us—much," said Marrable, as a burst of noisy laughter broke from the "cosy corner" where Mrs. West, Mrs. Mossenthal, and Bertie Chant had their heads very close together.

"It is my fault," answered the girl, a little wearily. "I am not used to society yet. I dare say I shall like it one day."

Marrable glanced to where Lady Theo's naked shoulders gleamed like polished ivory beneath the wicked eyes of Vere Marindin; to where Mrs. Vane, her point gained with her *protégé*, grinned and grimaced with the sense of gratified power; to where Mrs. Mossenthal, her sallow, cold face quick with malice, retailed salacious gossip to the group gathered round her.

"Does Lady St. Cyprien know you are here to-night?" asked Marrable presently. He had sunk into the lounge at Mary's side, and was too physically comfortable to move away from the silent girl in search of a more amusing companion.

"Oh, yes; I tell her everything. She is my dearest—almost my dearest friend."

"So I always understood. But may I ask, Miss Levinge, with the privilege of an old friend of *almost* your dearest friend, who stands before Lady St. Cyprien in your affections?"

Mary blushed a little, as a child does who guards a precious secret.

"I would rather not tell you, Dr. Marrable; you would only laugh at me."

"Now, Lady Bellastier," cried' Sac Mossenthal, forgetting his lesson on social etiquette in the exuberant prospect of a game of cards; "what's it to be? Nap, *chemin de fer*, or real baccarat?"

"Baccarat's good enough for me," said her ladyship, pulling her chair up to the table and preparing for action.

"Come on, you fellows! Come, Marrable, and have a flutter. Greenfield, put up the bank. Now, Taunton. Come on, Delamere; the ladies can talk to each other."

But Mr. Mossenthal got such a furious look from his wife that he hastened to amend such an Oriental sentiment, and added roughly:

"Except those who want to play, of course."

Three minutes later Mary was alone. Every one save Mrs. Mossenthal and Mrs. Vane, who had united in abusing a mutual friend, was gathered round the card-table. The girl felt frightfully lonely in the big white drawing-room with its score of electric lamps that stared like big yellow eyes. Every burst of laughter from the noisy card-players seemed to thrust her further away.

Why had they invited her here only to exile her, like some naughty child, to a corner? Why had they not left her in her home, which she was growing to love so well, where she spent such happy evenings with her books and her thoughts, and always the unfathomable sweet eyes of her dear picture?

A childish anger against these people who would not leave her in peace, and who openly neglected her when they had gained their ends, filled her heart. The garish room, with its distant, motley group, was blotted and blurred by the hot tears which forced themselves into her eyes. The

chink of money and the babble of noisy laughter grew like the thick sound of muffled waves in her ears. Only Vere Marindin's fluty voice asking Bertie Chant for a light struck sharply through the confused roar. She tried to move, but something swayed beneath her feet; she tried to cry aloud, but a knot in her throat strangled her.

"Mary, come upstairs with me."

Mrs. Mossenthal's large cool hand and thin, icy voice roused her, and she struggled to her feet and followed her hostess from the room.

Once upstairs, Mrs. Mossenthal rang for her maid, and sent downstairs for Dr. Marrable.

"Miss Levinge is a little faint. I suppose the room was too hot," said Mrs. Mossenthal, as Dr. Marrable entered her bedroom, where, in a large armchair, Mary lay white and silent. Then she whispered, in a stage aside: "Not too much sympathy; she is subject to these attacks, I fancy, and one has to be so firm with young girls."

Marrable nodded and passed her. Then took the girl's hand and laid his firm fingers on her wrist.

"Miss Levinge is merely a little overdone. She had better go home; in fact, I will take her and knock up a chemist *en route.*"

Mrs. Mossenthal's brows frowned ominously. She did not care to have one of her principal guests carried off by a chit of a girl, even though she was a big heiress. But Marrable, with his infinite knowledge of the eternal feminine, smoothed matters over by saying:

"I will just give Miss Levinge into the care of her maid, and shall be back here in half-an-hour." Then, as he passed out with Mary on his arm, he said to his hostess: "I must come back; I have had no chat with you yet."

The distance from Cleveland Square to Regent's Park was not great; but the cool air and cushioned quietness of

her brougham quickly restored Mary, and she was almost herself as she descended at her own door and gave Marrable her hand.

"Thank you for taking so much trouble, Dr. Marrable, and I will take the draught at once, and go to see you to-morrow morning. Make my apologies to Lady Theo for being so stupid—and, again, thank you."

Then the heavy door shut on her pale face, and sad, heavy eyes, and Marrable drove back in her carriage, as she had wished, to Cleveland Square.

It was the chill December dawn before the sleepy cabmen ranked in front of the Mossenthal's door were hailed by their fares. Lady Theo, ugly with fatigue and jubilant with success, was the first to go.

"Ask me again soon," she screamed out of the darkness, as her hansom turned the corner of the Square.

Marrable and Bertie Chant left the last, and Mrs. Mossenthal, with her white feather fan outspread upon her chest, stood on the doorstep to bid them good-bye.

"Then it's quite settled that Bertie and Vere Marindin and I dine with you to-morrow, doctor, and go to a play afterwards? Good-night," she called, into the cold dawn.

"What a charming party it has been," said Mrs. Mossenthal, as she unpinned her back hair.

"Why? Because you've got a dinner and a play out of it for nothing?" said Mr. Mossenthal with brutal frankness, as he rolled into bed and turned on one side.

"'Sac, you are a brute," retorted Mrs. Mosenthal.

CHAPTER XI

Four persons were gathered in Lady St. Cyprien's boudoir in Lowndes Square. The dusk of the winter afternoon was falling fast, but the fire flames dancing on the wide hearth struck at housand sparkling reflections from the quaint blue Dutch tiles and polished brass dogs.

"Ah, it is good to be here," sighed Dr. Marrable, who, with an unusual air of self-indulgence, was lounging in the full warmth of the hot red logs. "But, Lady St. Cyprien, promise to turn me out at five. It is a great nuisance, only I have such a string of people to see between then and dinner-time."

Lady St. Cyprien lifted her dark eyes from the fleecy work which occupied her fingers, and smiled across at Marrable.

"You are no better than the rest of us, then?" she said, with a quiet smile. "Roses and raptures have some attraction for you after all, anchorite though you profess to be."

"Nonsense!" broke in Lady Theo Bellastier, who was making a remarkable display of scarlet silk flounces and very dainty *bottines* to the fire. "Noel is no anchorite. Are you, my friend? Those who judge you so see only the surface, the consulting-room and sick-bedside view. Now I have known you—for how long?"

She lazily turned her head in the depths of a huge down pillow, and looked at him saucily from under her lashes.

"Your ladyship was just fourteen when I first attended

your mother, the Duchess," said Marrable with exaggerated politeness.

"So I was, and riding the gees barebacked in the paddock, and setting booby-traps for all my father's guests. Do you remember what particular form yours took?"

"A boot-jack."

"Ah ha!" pealed Lady Theo, at the recollection. "And you threatened to catch and kiss me if I ever played you such a trick again. Oh, dear, what idiots some women—your patients—are, not to suspect that somewhere about you there are hidden depths. Shall I enlighten them, Noel?"

With the grin of a mischievous child, Lady Theo tossed her smoked-out cigarette into the heart of the fire.

"Shall I tell them," she went on in a teasing way, "that you are a man who——?"

"For heaven's sake, don't," broke in Lord Stansdale, who till then had been content to listen to the ripple of chat and the whisper of the fluttering flames, from the depths of his armchair next to Lady St. Cyprien. "Why, if every woman did not think that she were destined to play the all-conquering Delilah to this invincible Samson, where would his practice be?"

Marrable laughed as he said: "Thanks, Stansdale, for your tribute to my professional skill."

"But, seriously, Noel," said the Countess, "do you not know that among the scores of women who fill your waiting-rooms every morning, there is always an air, intangible, vague, imperceptible, save to other women, of expectation? Every woman as she is shown into your waiting-room is regarded by those already there as a possible rival."

"A rival! In what?" cried Marrable, crossing Lady St. Cyprien's gentle voice with his own suave tones.

"In your affections," said Lady St. Cyprien, laying aside her work and preparing to face the situation.

"My affections! Good heavens! What on earth do the women want with a man like me? I am very plain." Marrable spoke with a brutal frankness, which commended itself to Lady Theo, for she said in her most decisive manner:

"So am I. Quite ugly, in fact; but that has never prevented me from having plenty of admirers. Now, you are ugly too, my dear doctor, but you are a bachelor, reported rich, and an accredited misogynist. Don't you know that such a reputation is sufficient to make my impressionable sex wild to catch you?"

"Theo, please don't interrupt," said Lady St. Cyprien. "We are discussing Noel and his would-be admirers. Now, I mean to lecture him on a side issue of the question." She faced round towards Marrable.

"Noel, why don't you marry?"

"Marry!" he cried, while every one laughed at the intensity with which he had been addressed.

"Stansdale answered your question before it was asked, my dear Lady St. Cyprien. What would become of my practice?"

"But you would enlarge it among families who now do not go to you because you are a bachelor. So many people hold that a doctor should be a married man."

Marrable shook his head.

"My dear Lady St. Cyprien, my patients, to let you into a secret, are mainly women with money to spare and time to waste. It amuses them to pass the morning in my waiting-rooms. Now I will tell you something. You and the women of your order who come to me are my genuine patients. You come for certain reasons, and are not likely to have ulterior motives."

Here Lady Theo shrugged her expressive shoulders and made a face.

"Oh! I am not going to preach the righteousness of the upper classes, Lady Theo. I am simply not the kind of man they notice. If I married to-morrow not one of my 'swell' patients would leave me; for, though as a doctor I may be fashionable, as a man I am not worthy of a second thought."

He implied no sneer in his manner of speech. He knew the women of his age too well to do more than comment on their foibles.

"But the difference would be in that great wealthy, virtuous middle class."

He turned to Lady Theo.

"You were at Mrs. Mossenthal's on Sunday night. You saw the women who were there, the wives and daughters of professional and business men. They are all patients of mine, and they come to me for two reasons—first, because they can rub shoulders with you and your order in my rooms and on my staircase. It is the same instinct which takes these Bayswater and Kensington maids and matrons, and vulgar City folk to Hurlingham and Sandown, to Ascot and the Park on Sunday. They flock in shoals to fashionable weddings and such semi-public functions, that they may gossip afterwards of a countess's gowns or a duchess's diamonds."

"How pleased Mrs. Mossenthal would be if she could hear you," murmured Lady Theo.

"Mrs. Mossenthal is of the type I mean. Vain, selfish, and silly; satisfied in her ignorant craving for smart society if she can boast that she has recognised Lady St. Cyprien in the Park, or has lost her money to you, Lady Theo, over the card-table; gratified still more in her vanity, if I—or any other man, for that matter—look into her eyes or hold her hand for one second longer than is necessary. Mrs. Mossenthal, and scores of women of her mental calibre and

social standing, would take her megrims and her guineas elsewhere to-morrow if I married."

"Of course Mrs. Mossenthal is a very commonplace person; and I do not think, dear Theo, you should go to her house; but from what I have seen of her—in your rooms, Noel, and at Mary's sometimes—I should at least have given her the credit of being rather a strict person. She has such a stiff, cold air about her."

Marrable laughed.

"My dear Lady St. Cyprien, the painful stiffness and *gauche* shyness of so many women of the Mossenthal type come merely from their inborn provincialism, and from the fact that in past generations the strict middle-class men prevented their womankind from mixing with the world at all. But that coldness you find, characterises their intercourse with both sexes, and is not therefore the result of excessive modesty—it is merely superficial. The women of the wealthy middle classes are immoral to a degree, and, as a rule, without the excuse of either passion or affection. They will permit and join in conversation of the coarsest kind, and the bulk of them are illiterate and ignorant, although you of other ranks have an idle trick of attributing all the virtues and accomplishments to them. No one can deny, or wishes to deny, that most of the world's art since the beginning of the Christian era has sprung from the brains of the great Jewish race of the lower orders; but such cases are mere psychological phenomena, other forms of the neurosis which is slowly but surely sapping all civilised humanity."

Five chimed from a silver clock.

"Ah! I must be going," said Marrable, drawing himself from the depths of his chair. "I have to see Miss Levinge first. Your little *protégée* is a charming child; but it's a pity she has not more nervous self-control—more moral fibre."

"Surely, Noel," said Lady St. Cyprian, warmly. "You would not class Mary Levinge among the Mrs. Mossenthals, and such people."

"There are exceptions to every rule," he said, gravely, as he bent over her hand.

Tea and the lights came as Dr. Marrable left the room, and silence reigned while the servants were present. When the three were alone once more Lord Stansdale was the first to break the silence.

"Is Miss Levinge really very delicate, Aunt Adela?"

Lady St. Cyprien shot a keen glance from her dark eyes at her nephew before she answered.

"No, my dear boy, not more so than hundreds of girls of her age. She is rather nervous, and fanciful, and anæmic. I shall take her to Royat-les-Bains next July, think."

"Unless——" drawled Lady Theo, with a suggestive little *moue*.

"Unless she should be married, you mean?"

Lady Theo had her mouth full of muffin, so nodded an assent.

"I do not think that Mary is in any hurry to marry," said Lady St. Cyprien, speaking very quietly and with some emphasis. "She has already, I believe, definitely refused the son of some people called Montagu, who live in Portland Place."

Stansdale flushed indignantly all over his handsome young face.

"You don't mean to say that that idiot, Lionel Montagu, the son of Ben Montagu, the money-lender, has dared to propose to the girl?" he cried, with heat.

"I don't know if the young man spoke to Mary himself, for she is very shy of talking of such things. But she told me she could go to the Montagus' no more, because they were vexed with her, and I gathered the rest."

Lady Theo's sharp eyes had wandered from Lady St. Cyprien's face to Lord Stansdale and back again. Suddenly she set down her tea-cup with a decided clatter, and said, with an apparently indifferent air:

"And, pray, is not a young Jew good enough for Mary Levinge to marry?"

"Not a Lionel Montagu," cried Stansdale, indignantly, "he is three parts crazy."

"Besides, I feel sure that in her choice of a husband Mary will be guided by her own heart," said the Countess, quietly.

An hour later, Lady Theo said, with many yawns and stretchings of her limbs, that she must be going.

"Theo," said Lady St. Cyprien, as she kissed her at the head of the stairs, "don't tease about Mary Levinge before Stansdale. You know he is deeply attached to her."

"Not really?" cried Lady Theo, with well-affected surprise. "But do you—would Lord St. Cyprien——?"

"We should be delighted. Stansdale is not rich, as you know, and Mary's money would be useful; but, apart from that, her beautiful nature, her modest ways, her sweetness and purity, have endeared her to us inexpressibly. Of course I know there will be an outcry in society; but I intend to have her with me a good deal now, and people so soon forget things. Besides, Stansdale is rather old-fashioned in his ideas, and will never marry a girl from among our own set, who has had her *affaires de cœur*, her lovers' quarrels and reconciliations, and endless escapades, from the time she was in short frocks."

Little Lady Theo, with her fascinatingly ugly face and her pretty figure, winked with both her eyes as she tripped downstairs, and thought of her own girlhood.

CHAPTER XII

The spring was early and the Park in March had quite an air of first summer days. Even Mrs. Marx, chilly and slow-blooded from sheer inanition, loosened the heavy furs about her throat and said to Mary, as the victoria dashed down the wide road that leads from the Marble Arch to Piccadilly, "It is a fine day!"

Mary nodded. She was looking unusually pretty. The wooing breaths of the new-born season had urged her virgin blood to a warmer course, and touched the pale oval of her face with a flush of love for life. Even the calm depths of her light almond eyes were stirred, and danced with the baby leaves upon the trees. Nature's great heart throbbed in her veins and almost woke her from her life-long Galatea sleep.

"There's Miss Levinge's carriage," said Eugene Cohen to his mother as Mary's smart equipage pulled up in the sunshine at the end of the Row. "How well she looks to-day! I never saw anybody vary so much. Sometimes she would pass for an ugly girl if it weren't that her features were so good."

"Young girls never look alike two days together," said Mrs. Cohen, whose pronounced appearance presented as little variation from month to month as the surface of a stone wall.

Mrs. Cohen and her son occupied two chairs in the front of the morning parade ground. Eugene did not often escort his mother into public, and in honour of such an

event she had arrayed herself in an elaborate and very tight costume of black velvet, in which she was already too warm.

Eugene Cohen was an accurate type of the young Jew who goes into "Society." His black hair, which was kept scrupulously short at the back, still retained, despite cosmetics and continued brushing, a strong "kink" above the forehead and at the sides. His dark skin was brightly touched with red on the cheeks and lips. His eyes, like his mother's, were full and handsome, but the coarse nose and unmistakable twang in the speech discounted his better features. His clothes, of which he seemed to have an ever-varying wardrobe, were always too new, the tailor's folds were too conspicuous, and the padding on the shoulders too obvious. He never wore a pair of gloves twice, and discarded his boots and ties wholesale. Of Bohemian clubs and theatrical dances he was an acknowledged supporter. Without his presence on Saturday at supper or Sunday at dinner, the Savoy restaurant would scarcely have known itself. He had a complete "by sight" acquaintance with the entire peerage, had raced a little, gambled a good deal, and was now lying fallow preparatory to making a good marriage.

His little gallantries with Mrs. Montagu had effectually spoiled his chances with the daughters of the house of Raffstein—the aristocrats of the London Jews—and an ordinary Bayswater heiress would scarcely have suited either him or his mother. Mary Levinge had been impossible so long as her grandfather had been alive, but with the old man dead, and his money-bags bequeathed to the girl, the match seemed commendable to Eugene. So much was it in his thoughts that almost unconsciously he said, "If she were my wife I should have Baird's name put over the place in Bond Street, take her away to Paris for a year

to give her style, then have her presented at Court, live in Mayfair, and cut every Jew in London."

Mr. Eugene Cohen smiled broadly and boastfully as he spoke of the parent race. He was one of the renegade Hebrews, who in their hearts loathe their own people, who are more anti-Jewish than the most fanatical Christian, who would change their names with their coats, and would give of their beloved gold to rid themselves of their tribal attributes. If there was one more potent charm about Mary Levinge, in Mr. Cohen's fine dark eyes, than her wealth, it was her singular dissimilarity to the Jewish race. She would pass anywhere for a thoroughbred Gentile.

"Mary does look quite sweet to-day," Mrs. Cohen said presently, with a side-glance fixed on Eugene's face. "I'm not sure that habit of hers of always wearing white is not rather distinguished."

"It's peculiar enough, if that's what you mean, but not at all good form. You never heard of one of the really great ladies sticking to one particular colour or style; they wear anything and everything. It is a rather provincial taste in Mary, being what she is. Of course if she were another kind of person it would be all right. She'd be called *La Dame Blanche*, and be quite a celebrity on the strength of the fad."

Mrs. Cohen smiled approvingly. Queen of Bayswater though she was, her kingdom was bounded by Portland Place, and she always—in private—gave her son the *pas* in matters of sociology.

"Don't you think you had better go and speak to her? There, she is looking this way and sees us. Wait a minute, Eugene, not so fast; I think I will come with you."

"What a perfect day!" said Mary presently, looking with longing eyes down the pale green alleys of the

Park. "Aunt Judith, do come for a stroll. It will do you good."

But Aunt Judith rolled out a guttural protest, and Mary's face fell.

Mrs. Cohen felt that the psychological moment had arrived. "Eugene, take Miss Levinge for a little walk. I will stay and talk to Mrs. Marx till you come back."

With elaobrate politeness and much bowing of Mr. Eugene Cohen's full-grown body upon his undersized legs —for he did not only favour his people in his face and speech—Mary was handed from her carriage, and her place filled with Mrs. Cohen's massive frame.

When she had once seen the young people started on their stroll down the Row, Mrs. Cohen raised her parasol, offered up a prayer that none of her friends would see her sitting alongside Mrs. Marx, and knowing that her companion was no conversationalist, prepared to go to sleep with her eyes open.

"That's the Duke of Grandchester on that chestnut over there; and Lord Poulteney, with Lady Betty Wexford, whom he's going to marry next week, are with him," began Eugene in his best manner.

"Oh, yes!" said Mary, nodding and smiling at the group, who returned her salute. "I know them quite well." Then seeing a momentary astonishment creep over Eugene's face, she added very simply, "They came to the Art Gallery, you know. The Duke was my grandfather's first customer, and they became great friends. As to Lady Betty, she came one day when she was about ten, with her mother, the Countess of Bray, and began playing about till she broke a Dresden vase, one of a pair. I remember how angry grandfather was, and the Countess boxed Lady Betty's ears. She and I were laughing about it all, the other day, at Lady St. Cyprien's."

Mary spoke with such straightforward candour that it was impossible to believe she was making any display of her acquaintanceship with the salt of the earth. Eugene, however, considered it better for the moment to cease pointing out smart people to his companion, but rather to assume the knowledge she evidently possessed.

"You see a great deal of Lady St. Cyprien, don't you?" he asked, settling his shoulders in the padding of his coat, and trying to set his short rolling gait to the girl's gliding walk. "She's an awfully nice sort of woman."

"Do you know her?" queried Mary, raising her arched brows in astonishment.

"Oh, no, I don't know her, but—I know a lot of fellows who do, and they all say she's awfully jolly."

"I think your friends must be thinking of some one else. Lady St. Cyprien is the dearest, most perfectly sympathetic woman in the world, but she is not what most people would call 'jolly.'"

"Oh! well, you know what I mean, Miss Levinge," said Eugene, thinking that he would have to correct this tendency to hyper-precision in his wife. "We all know what we mean, but gentlemen can't always express themselves with the same particularity as you ladies."

Eugene Cohen, in spite of his knowledge of manners and things, had never overcome the vulgarity which lies in the misuse of the words "gentleman" and "lady."

"That seems rather a pity," said Mary, and then the conversation, which had been but a poor thing at the beginning, languished and died.

Mary's lithe young limbs moved quickly, and already the far end of the Row, where a great *bosquet* of budding lilacs and laburnums hid Kensington Gardens from view, was in sight.

Eugene Cohen knew perfectly well the task he had to

accomplish before he and Mary returned to the carriage. It was not a light one, for the girl gave him no encouragement; in fact, she seemed oblivious of his presence.

She had lowered her parasol and was swinging it lightly from two fingers as she paced along. Her gaze was fixed on the distant clump of bushes, her slightly parted lips indicated deep thought.

"Are you going to the Montagu's dance next week?" he said, suddenly determined to break the silence and trust to chance to give him a lead.

To his astonishment a swift blush stained the pale fairness of her skin. Then he thought he saw his mistake.

"I beg your pardon, I am sure," he said, twanging his words a little more than usual in his confusion. "I forgot your mourning. Seeing you always in white, one forgets."

"It is not that," said Mary, turning honest, clear eyes towards him, though the blush still lingered in her cheeks. "Mrs. Montagu has not invited me. She is very angry with me."

It was Eugene's turn to change colour now. A red light flashed into his bright brown eyes, and his straight white teeth set on his lower lip.

Was it possible that Mrs. Montagu was going to play the jealous mistress; was going to interfere with his settlement in life, because of half-a-dozen stolen meetings, and a few furtive hand-clasps? This slip of a woman, with her bouncing grown-up daughters, could not hope to retain for ever the greenhorn admiration of a man young enough to be her son-in-law. She must surely be mad, to risk a scandal after so many years, by making an open rupture with the girl who was for the moment the acknowledged catch of the Jewish community. If the affair leaked out, how furious his mother would be! It would end in society—*their* society, dividing into two camps—and then how the Christians would

laugh—and at the thought of affording amusement to the Christian, the Jew-hater writhed.

"Yes! Mrs. Montagu is dreadfully cross with me," went on Mary, in a slightly tremulous voice. "She has even forbidden Rose and Linda to come to see me."

She walked precisely to the railing at the end of the Row, touched it with her hand as a child playing a game might have done, then turned to walk back.

"Do you know—do you guess any reason?" mumbled Eugene, still very red in the face.

"I—I—think—I think, I am almost sure I do," said Mary, lowering her long dark lashes and slackening her swift steps.

"What is it?" cried Eugene, forgetting his veneer of fine manners in his anxiety to know the worst.

"I don't think I ought to tell you," said Mary, blushing again, and looking very pretty and very shy.

"It must be something to do with me, or the girl would never look like that. Damn Mrs. Montagu and her spiteful Portugee ways," thought Eugene to himself. Then, feeling that nothing but a brave front would avert a world of troubles, he cried, with a fervour that savoured of the theatrical:

"Then you believe the calumny, Miss Levinge. You lend your ears to every idle tale that an envious, tattling world brings to your door. Because, for some silly whim, a woman such as Mrs. Montagu does not ask you to her house, you accept, without a word, insinuations against me?"

Mary stopped short in the centre of the path.

"Mr. Cohen! what are you talking about? How can it concern you, or your good name, whether I am invited to Mrs. Montagu's house or not? Since you have elected to make a mountain out of a molehill, I may tell you that I believe she is vexed because——"

"Because——?"

"Because, some months ago, when Mrs. Montagu did me the honour to wish me to be her daughter-in-law, I declined."

"You declined?" cried Eugene, between one gasp of relief and another of hope.

Mary saw no reason to repeat her words and walked on.

"May I—Miss Levinge—may I ask why?" murmured Eugene in her ear, for the danger being overpast, he assumed once more his most impressive society air.

"I do not like Lionel Montagu," said Mary, walking very quickly towards the upper end of the Row, whence already the crowd of promenaders was dispersing itself in black patches, which marred the fresh young green of the springing grass.

"No other reason at all? Are you sure?" persisted Eugene.

"What other reason could I have? Surely, Mr. Lionel Montagu is reason enough in himself," said Mary tersely.

"There was no whisper of love in your heart for another?" Eugene quoted from a play in which he had recently performed the amorous hero.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Cohen," said Mary, in rather a nervous way. The purest and most innocent of woman have the instinct of sex prudery aroused by a threatened proposal.

"Have you ever cared for any one else?" whispered her persistent wooer.

The girl's pride drove the blood into her cheeks.

"Mr. Cohen, I am not a woman who will ever give her heart unsought."

Eugene smiled, such a conventional beginning must surely argue the desired ending.

"But if I sought your heart?" he asked hurriedly, for

they were rapidly nearing Albert Gate, and to propose amid a grating of chairs and crowds of shifting people would only be absurd. "If I told you that I loved you, have loved you for some time past, would you give me your heart then?"

Mary had turned very pale, almost livid, beneath the shadow of her hat. She did not speak, but shook her head.

"Of course I mean, would you be my wife?" said Eugene, sticking with characteristic tenacity to his purpose. "My mother will welcome you as a daughter; you know how fond she is of you. Miss Levinge—do not walk so fast—I want to tell you that I love you, more than I ever thought I should. I——"

"I am much obliged, but I cannot possibly marry you," came from beneath Mary's sunshade.

"But surely this is not final. Let me call and plead my cause."

"Nothing will make me alter my mind."

And then Miss Levinge did an undignified thing. She positively ran the last hundred yards of the Row and presented herself pale, agitated, and breathless before her Aunt Judith and Mrs. Cohen.

The latter saw at a glance that her son's suit had not prospered, but she, too, never knew when she was beaten.

"I shall drive round to see you this afternoon at three," she said icily, as Eugene came up with a sullen look on his handsome face and lent his aid while she descended from the victoria.

"But—I—" protested Mary falteringly.

"At three," repeated Mrs. Cohen, with a stiff bow. "Eugene, we will go that way and pick up a cab."

CHAPTER XIII

But when Mrs. Cohen in her high-hung claret-coloured barouche swept up the short drive to the door of Holmhurst, on the very stroke of three, she was informed by the suave butler that Miss Levinge had gone out in a hansom directly after luncheon, and he could not say when she would be back.

Mrs. Cohen thereupon contented herself by delivering a long discourse on her son's devotion and Mary's foolish flippancy to Mrs. Marx, who, having lunched more freely than usual on cold fish, pickled cucumbers, and almond pudding, was in a somnolent condition, and only hoped that a lack of argument would bring the interview to a speedy termination, and so give her time for a good sleep before tea.

Mary, meanwhile, alone and utterly friendless in her great luxurious house, had flown to Lady St. Cyprien. This second proposal, this personal avowal of love from a man, troubled and frightened her. When Mrs. Montagu had urged reasons why Mary should permit herself to be engaged to Lionel, the idea of marriage had seemed so remote, so vague, that she had scarcely realised that she had refused. Her only memory of the interview rested on Mrs. Montagu's outspoken expressions of anger and disappointment.

But this second offer, from a man she had but slightly known, and of whom she had never thought, this love suit pressed upon her with hot breath that fanned her cheek and

passionate eyes that sought her own, had alarmed her. If Eugene Cohen had had another five minutes to plead his cause, his object might have been gained, for it is often the most timid bird that will, from fascinated fear, return to the lure, but fortune had not favoured him.

Mary was alarmed, and, virginally, a little disgusted; but no instincts had been roused within her, and it was the dreaded annoyance of a repetition of the proposal through Mrs. Cohen that drove her for refuge to Lowndes Square, rather than a girlish desire to confess the first flutterings of an awakened heart.

"Take off your hat, child, and sit down," said Lady St. Cyprien, when Mary was announced. "A little bird told me you were looking charming in the Park this morning—but—" and her keen kind eyes took in every faint token of distress on the girl's face—"what has happened to worry you, my dear?"

"You guess I am worried then?" said Mary, forcing a faint smile to her mouth.

For answer the Countess lifted a hand-mirror, quaintly set in old beaten silver, from a table and held it up to Mary's face, reflecting her heavy-lidded eyes, humid with unshed tears, her pale cheeks and down-drawn mouth.

"Look at yourself," said Lady St. Cyprien, "then tell me what has happened."

She put the mirror down, then laid her hands—such strong, firm hands—on Mary's slender, gloved fingers.

"Mary, my child, be your trouble trivial or great, real or merely a fancy, tell it—not of necessity to me—but to some one, any one. You always kept your baby woes, your childish confidences, locked in your own heart. But, my dear, the trials, the griefs, the joys of womanhood must be yours now, and there will be no room for them. Or if you nurse them too long, and clasp them too closely, they will

stifle you, and kill your sweet nature as ivy kills the noblest tree. I know your childhood has been lonely; you have had neither wise advisers nor friends; you have fed your soul and your imagination on the musty remnants of the past, but now you must give your heart wholesome food, or it will lie like a stone within your bosom."

Lady St. Cyprien paused a moment, then in a lighter tone said:

"Well, Mary, am I to be your *confidante?*"

Mary slipped along the sofa that held them both till her shoulder touched Lady St. Cyprien.

"If you please!" she answered simply.

Then she related almost word for word Eugene Cohen's proposal. She did not blush as she repeated what her would-be lover had said; only her eyes involuntarily widened as though she spoke of something disagreeable to her.

Lady St. Cyprien let her finish even so far as her confession that she had fled before the threatened invasion of Mrs. Cohen. Then she spoke.

"But, my dear, this marriage is very different from the Montagu affair. Surely Mr. Cohen is a nice person, well off—though that need not affect you—good-looking, and a suitable age. It is true, there have been, I believe——"

Here the Countess stopped. Her sense of honour urged her to place such a marriage in the most favourable light before Mary, though her desire that the girl should one day become Lord Stansdale's wife tempted her with the feminine bait of retailing gossip about the wooer of that morning. But one glance at Mary's face stayed her. It would be mere wanton wickedness to raise by one inch the veil of purity which clung about the girl's white soul. So Lady St. Cyprien put the curb on her tongue, and continued, with heroic abnegation:

"You must not decide so important an event without due

thought. I think you should give this Mr. Cohen, who would appear to be really fond of you, another chance."

"I could not do that," said Mary, in her firmest manner, and shaking her head.

"Do you not like him, then?"

"I shall never marry," said the girl, evading the quibble, and with characteristic honesty speaking the truth.

Lady St. Cyprien's dark face assumed a mingled look of quiet delight and shrewd prescience. She knew that Mary Levinge was both proud and shy, and she felt sure that the girl was making a dignified assertion, in case some man whom she loved should never propose to her.

"All girls say that, my dear, and to a certain extent it is maidenly and right that they should. The young girl who, for whatever reason, openly hunts a man into matrimonial bondage is contemptible; but I hope, and indeed feel sure, that you will marry some day, my love, for a woman unmarried is a woman marred, to misquote the old proverb. At present you are very young to bind yourself. You must see the world a little, and learn the ways of all men, before you choose one. And this brings me to a subject which is very near my heart."

Lady St. Cyprien dropped her voice a little. She was going to refer to the one grief of her life, her childlessness. It was a sorrow which had remained green, and which she had never been able to put from her.

"I want to ask a favour of you, for myself and for Lord St. Cyprien, my dear. Ah! you look surprised, and you are wondering what you can do for us. Mary, you can give us yourself for a while, until some one worthy of your love and yourself claims you. Stay, don't speak; let me finish. We, St. Cyprien and I, have been married nearly twenty years; if God had been good to us we might have had a daughter of your age. But we never had any children.

Will you be our daughter? I do not ask you to leave Holmhurst. It is only right that you should bear the responsibilities of your wealth, but will you be with us as much as possible? You are worthy of better things than can fall to your share if you are left to such people as the Montagus and Cohens. With me, you would go to the best houses in the kingdom, and could count among your friends the highest, cleverest, most exclusive of men and women. From among them I hope you will one day choose a husband, and so find a very happy life."

Mary was silent for a while, but the slight twitching of her mouth and the restless twisting of her hands showed she was struggling to voice some of the thoughts and dreams which had been hers for so long.

"Lady St. Cyprien, how can I thank you?" she said, presently, her lips trembling with emotion and her eyes brilliant with gathering tears. "Ah! I know, you ask no thanks, but it eases me to give them. If I may be with you sometimes, I shall be grateful; you have been my best and truest friend, and I feel you love me. But," she lifted one hand slightly, then let it fall heavily on her knee again, "I cannot be as your daughter."

She shook her head, round which the loose tendrils of her fair hair cast a pallid halo. Two heavy tears dropped from her lashes and rolled swiftly down her cheeks.

"No thought, no persuasion, can change me. All your sweet tenderness, all my deep gratitude, cannot bring us quite together, can never bind us as mother and daughter should be bound. We are of a different people. I come of an accursed race, who yet have laboured through long centuries with but one hope—redemption. Your people have persecuted mine through the centuries. The old feud is dying now, I think, but not so easily or so quickly that you and I can be as of one flesh."

Lady St. Cyprien sighed a little. Deep and sincere as was her personal affection for this charming Jewish girl, much as she desired her gentle companionship, highly as she valued her sweet affection, her own heart, versed in knowledge of the world and the ways of men, admitted with most characteristic honesty the absolute justice of Mary's words. To hear the truth grieved her all the more in that she fully grasped the sincerity of the girl's meaning.

She might advise and befriend Mary, who in turn might confide in and consult her; the perfection of unbounded friendship and trust might exist between them, but, sooner or later, the difference that lies immutably between the people of the East and West must arise. It might be trivial or unsurmountable; a question of sociology or a matter of religious ethics, or it might range from the cut of a gown to the choice of a husband.

But what ever it might be about, the difference would come, and love and friendship would break down before a habit of body or trick of thought engendered in either, through scores of ancestors. Lady St. Cyprien felt instinctively that not yet were the Jew and the Gentile to be as one, and again she sighed.

Her evident disappointment wrung Mary's heart. She turned her swimming eyes on her friend and held out one slender hand.

"Yes, I will be with you," she said softly, "when and where you wish—but my life will not be lived in ballrooms, my destiny will not be fulfilled—in society. May I go home now?"

Meekly, and like a little child, she held her sweet mouth to Lady St. Cyprien to kiss, then she left the house.

"That girl is terribly nervous," said Lady St. Cyprien aloud, in an effort to steady her stirred emotions, as she heard the front door close behind Mary. "Noel Marrable

was quite right when he said some time ago that she lacked mental self-control. I cannot but wish that she were less fanciful, less imaginative. These strange ideas she has are hardly healthy. But—she is very young—and impressions fade so quickly from girl's minds. I must take her to Mason's next week, and interest her about her gowns for the season, and Stansdale must be a little attentive. This young Jew has evidently rushed at his fences and fallen at the first. Stansdale will manage his wooing better than that, and try and bring her to a more natural state of mind."

When Mary reached home the lovely March day was drawing to a close. It was a Friday, and within an hour, when the sun would have set, the Sabbath would begin.

As usual, Martin Baird was expected to dinner, and Mary went straight to her room to change her white cloth frock for a soft, flowing gown of snowy China silk. She was just dressed when a fluttering knock at the door heralded Mrs. Marx. She so seldom left her own apartments, that Mary instinctively felt that this incursion boded no good.

It was, however, short-lived, for Mrs. Marx was neither an adept at arranging her ideas, nor at giving them utterance. Her brief visit resolved itself into a whining complaint, spoken in a barbarous mixture of Polish, English, and Yiddish, concerning Mary's wickedness in refusing to become the wife of Eugene Cohen, of Mrs. Cohen's disappointment, of Ephraim Levinge's anger—for she seemed to be oblivious of his death—and of the wrath which the Judaical authorities would pour on Mary's head when they learnt that she chose her friends from among an alien race. Her muddled remonstrances given forth, Mrs. Marx retired, quite satisfied, to her own rooms.

The protest had been ridiculous, but it wearied Mary, who was already unstrung by the emotions of the day. She looked tired and worn as she faced Baird at dinner that night;

and he, with the ever-present consciousness of her heart loneliness, was deeply moved by the mournful expression of her pale face.

He spoke of her weary mien, and then she made an effort to be brighter.

"I am only tired," she said, with a faint smile. "Tired of doing nothing, I expect. After dinner we will have a long turn at the books. I shall be a very stern mistress this evening, and shall complain of everything."

But the books were never looked at after all, for at the end of dinner she overset a glass, which broke as it fell, and cut her across the wrist.

The pain was trifling, but the bleeding was severe for a few minutes, and gave her a headache. She spent the evening lying, white and weary, on the sofa, which stood beneath the old panel picture of the Madonna.

Baird remarked how the likeness between the painted face and the living girl had deepened, but added, with his rare smile:

"If you grow so pale, Miss Levinge, there will be but little resemblance left."

She shook her head.

"You must not say that, Martin. I have been like her ever since I was a child. I am like her still—I shall be like her in the future."

Then she fell into thought, with her eyes closed against the world, and the corners of her full, curved mouth pressed together.

CHAPTER XIV

Next morning Mary rose with a fuller, happier sense of life than she had felt yesterday. The young cannot always fix their eyes upon the future, and the present was fair for her and not without interest. As she dressed, the memory came to her that she was to lunch that day with Lady Theo Bellastier, and she chose her prettiest white gown to honour the occasion.

Lady Theo Bellastier's drawing-room in Wilton Place was a reflex of herself. Furniture of extraordinary ugliness—bought in the long ago by the worthy old country gentleman whom Lady Theo called "husband" when she noticed him at all—formed a lumbering background to the thousand prettinesses and impertinences which formed her ladyship's idea of decoration.

A huge console table of gloomy mahogany and bilious Sienna marble was covered with half-a-dozen outrageous little statuettes in clear Parian china and many bowls of sweet-scented flowers.

Bertie Chant had said one day that the clumsy table with its airy burden of pert figures and exquisite flowers reminded him of Lady Theo's face, with her wide mouth, vulgar nose, and divine eyes, and the simile was not ill-thought out—for Bertie Chant.

Lady Theo was telling her assembled guests this personal joke, of which she was rather proud, as Mary Levinge was announced.

Lady St. Cyprien was seated in the window, discussing

a new altar-piece for her country parish church with Eliot Mayne, the artist, who was more than usually picturesque in *chevelure* and Philistine in garments. She paused in her talk as Mary was announced, and noted with some degree of pleasure with what self-possession the girl entered the room. Mary greeted those she knew with quiet ease, and acknowledged two or three introductions with a charming smile.

"It is marvellous to think that such manners ever came out of a Ghetto," murmured Lady St. Cyprien.

"I beg your pardon," said Eliot Mayne. "I do not understand."

"I was guilty of thinking aloud, Mr. Mayne," laughed Lady St. Cyprien, and at the same time nodding across the room to Mary.

"Who is that girl in white who has just come in?" asked the artist. "She is pretty, of course; but somehow that seems scarcely the word to describe her. Every woman is pretty in her own particular line nowadays; but that face is neither of our century nor of our standard of beauty."

He drew his brows together above his keen dark eyes, as though a dead memory were struggling to live again.

"It is a strange thing, Lady St. Cyprien, but in an odd way that face gives one the impression of scarcely being of this world at all."

Lady St. Cyprien started, and a shade of annoyance clouded her face. Eliot Mayne's words recalled too vividly the conversation of yesterday, words she wished and purposed putting away from her memory for ever.

"Please do not say anything so uncanny," she cried, in her most downright manner; "particularly before Miss Levinge herself. She is a most sweet girl, but rather full of fancies."

"Is that Miss Levinge?" cried Mayne, a vivid interest

growing in his voice. "Is that the child with the yellow hair and the long taper hands I used to see years ago at old Levinge's place in Bond Street? How singularly beautiful she has grown."

With the *gaucherie* an indulgent society fosters in the "artistic" temperament, he rose slowly from Lady St. Cyprien's side, and, crossing the room, made himself known to Mary.

The luncheon was a great success. Lady Theo, who believed in the sociability of a round table and an indiscriminate "salad" of people, laughed and chattered between a music-hall singer famous for delineations of inebriety and a pushing politician who had hopes of a seat in the Cabinet before the week was out.

Mary was next Lord Stansdale. The nervous tears of the previous day had acted as a storm which had cleared the air, and she was brighter and more animated than usual.

"Now tell me who everybody is," she said, when the first two courses had been duly discussed.

"That's not so easy," laughed Stansdale. "Lady Theo ought always to issue biographical sketches of her guests. One is always sure that everybody here is somebody—after a fashion, though it is not always easy to fix them."

"Well, tell me about those whom you can fix," persisted Mary. "Now, what is the man doing here who is sitting between Lady St. Cyprien and Dr. Marrable? He looks like a labourer and workman of some sort."

"Wrong the first time, Miss Levinge. That man couldn't work to save his life, and wouldn't if he could."

"Then who is he? He's got on a flannel shirt."

"He is an Anarchist of the leather-lunged order. He has a fine though somewhat broad flow of language, which he pours forth at East End Radical Clubs three days a week

and on Sundays in Hyde Park. He quails like a cur every time one of Lady Theo's big footmen goes near him, and he has up to now gone through every course with determination and one knife and fork. He will drink all he can get, and to-morrow will denounce the aristocracy and their degrading luxury in more full-flavoured language than ever."

"And who is the queer-looking woman on Dr. Marrable's left?"

"Mrs. Susan Gordon. She's a New Woman, you know. Didn't you catch sight of her—extremities upstairs? She is attired in canvas shoes, ribbed woollen stockings, and breeches. She arrived here on a bicycle. She holds antique and worn-out theories concerning the superiority of women."

"Is she married?"

"Yes, to a rather nice little fellow. He hunts with the Quorn all the winter, then goes and fishes in Norway till the cubbing begins. His name is Dick Massingham."

"Massingham! But you called her Gordon—Mrs. Susan Gordon—just now."

"Oh! that's one of her theories. She thinks that the adoption of a husband's name on marriage is an outward and visible sign of a moral and physical degradation. Nice woman, isn't she?"

"I am afraid I think her horrid; but then, you see, the women of my people have not yet outgrown the Orientalism of centuries," said Mary frankly.

Lord Stansdale was silent. He was honestly and truly in love with Mary. His was not perhaps a very grand passion, but then the high-born English temperament does not readily lend itself to ecstatics about anything. He only knew that he found her the prettiest girl in London, that her "form" was perfectly unimpeachable, and that if he should win her for his wife, he would make her a very

affectionate and faithful husband. Of her money he thought but little, of her family not at all. One thing only distressed him at times. Stansdale felt for Jews all the contempt with which a triumphant nation regards the conquered. With the glorious traditions of an ancestry of warriors before him, he could feel nothing but supreme disdain for a race which had only kept a place among nations by huckstering and intriguing. It galled his pride and wounded his vanity to know that the woman he loved and respected was sprung from a people he despised, and he was annoyed that she should seek to remind him of the fact.

"That is Eliot Mayne, is it not?" went on Mary, innocent of having vexed her neighbour. "I often saw him at the Galleries in my grandfather's lifetime. But who is the odd man next to him? The one with the ring on his thumb and the stiff round collar."

"Don't you know Erastus Bawdon, Miss Levinge? Why, he is the greatest *dilettante* in religion and amateur ecclesiastical art of our day. He has professed all faiths in his time, even your own, but he is just now a Roman Catholic. He is enormously rich, and is building an exquisite church in the grounds of his house in Berkshire. He has been scouring Europe for carvings, pictures, and statues. He considers that the true *crux* of religion lies in art, and he attributes the diminished power of the Pope in England to the fact that the pictures in Roman Catholic places of worship are vilely drawn and horribly coloured, and that the statues are faulty in modelling and lacking in intention."

Mary looked across at Mr. Bawdon. He was a big, heavy man, with a coarse mouth and a square jaw, closely shaven. His short black hair, which was very thick on the temples, was brushed forward on to his forehead in a manner sug-

gesting a tonsure on the crown. His attire was severe, and of a priestly cut, his only ornament being a magnificent thumb-ring set with a carved emerald. In a voice both sonorous and deep he was laying down the law to Eliot Mayne, who, replete with the products of Lady Theo's *chef*, was nodding his artistically arranged head in comfortable acquiescence.

"I maintain that even the greatest masters erred in this matter. They saw their Marys and other holy women with the eyes of a lover, or at best a husband. The same model would sit for the Holy Mother and the Magdalen. Look at the fat German *fraus*, the lovely, loose-living Venetians, the blowsy *Flamandes*, who posed through centuries for saints, and gave religion its ideal Virgin Marys. It was nothing short of blasphemy, and bad art into the bargain."

His voice rose, and his emphatic words and ponderous gestures stilled the tattle of the table.

"Latter-day church art is even worse, for it is founded on the most debased traditions. Noel Paton's pictures could not inspire a single spark of religious sentiment. I would sooner far hang Watts's "Love and Life" above an altar than "The Good Shepherd." As for my own church, I am deterimned it shall go bare of pictures and sculptured art till I can find something which will aid religion. My Lady Chapel shall have no image of the Virgin until I see a face which suggests by its beauty and innocence the Mother of——"

Mr. Bawdon lifted his glass in his big hairy hand, intending to drink when he had finished speaking. His eyes met those of Mary. She sat just opposite to him, and as silence fell upon the rest of the party, her whole attention had been given to him. With a faint flush staining the fair pallor of her cheeks, her wax-white lids half lowered over her eyes, the slender thread of her brows

crossing the round full forehead, and her mouth slightly relaxed from its usual compression, she looked across the table at the big ugly man, with the didactic manner and the square, blue chin.

For one long silent minute Mr. Bawdon stared at Mary in the same way as he would have scrutinised a picture. Then Lady Theo proposed cigarettes and coffee upstairs; the women fluttered from the room, with the men in a compact mass at their heels.

Once upstairs the stemmed tide of chatter broke out again. The Anarchist, with a fine cigar between his lips, and black coffee and liqueur at his side, was blinking in muddled astonishment at a wonderfully gowned American, who had introduced herself to him, and began the conversation by telling him he was "just too sweet for anything."

Mrs. Susan Gordon tackled Dr. Marrable on a "nice" point concerning sex relationship, Lady Theo wandered to the piano with a long-locked Italian musician who had come to London to make his fortune. Mary slipped into a low seat at Lady St. Cyprien's side, while Lord Stansdale and Bertie Chant joined Eliot Mayne and Mr. Bawdon, at the further end of the room, where a card-table was set out.

"My dear," began Lady St. Cyprien. "If you always look as pretty as you do this afternoon, I shall have the responsibility of a beauty as well as an heiress on my shoulders all the season."

"Ah! but I never promised."

"I know you didn't, but all the same you cannot go about even a little by yourself. I will let you off balls and races, till you beg me to take you to them, but you are too fond of music not to wish to go to the Opera sometimes. And you must drive every day, and go to a few really good houses with me. Why, you already are all the better for coming out to-day."

"Which I was nearly not able to do—I hurt my hand last night at dinner. I intended to show it to Dr. Marrable this morning, but was afraid he would forbid me to come here."

She smiled across to where he was suffering torments at the tongue of Mrs. Susan Gordon.

"Oh! my dear, Noel Marrable's patients are all women, and he has learnt the art of humouring them. That is the true secret of his success."

Bertie Chant, red-faced and smiling above the newest and most startling thing in cravats, ambled towards them.

"Miss Mary Levinge, the new beauty, looked quite charming in white," he quoted from a prospective paragraph, which he intended to write on his return home. "Lady St. Cyprien, both Mr. Eliot Mayne and Mr. Bawdon have a great favour to ask of your fair charge, and want to get you on their side. I told them that you were a shocking dragon, and that a lot of intercession was necessary."

He put his sleek head on one side and looked waggish. Ten minutes later it travelled round the room that at the request of Mr. Erastus Bawdon, Miss Levinge had consented to give sittings to Mr. Mayne for a picture of the Blessed Virgin, which would ultimately be placed above the altar in his new church.

Every one was enraptured: Lady Theo, that such an artistic event should have occurred in her Philistine abode; Bertie Chant, because he foresaw whole columns of smart, suggestive copy; Lord Stansdale, because it was a fitting tribute to the beauty and purity of the girl he admired. The little American, frantic to be "in the know," left her anarchist and frankly stared at Mary with a view to copying her style; Mrs. Susan Gordon regarded the affair as a vindication of the sex. Only Lady St. Cyprien felt a vague dislike to the scheme, which she could neither formulate nor voice.

Mary stood among them all, pale and moved. An ineffable joy that she was deemed worthy to pose as a model for her ideal, thrilled her, and made her blind and deaf to her surroundings. A rapt look crept over her face—she was fast drifting into a dream of perfect beatitude when Dr. Marrable touched her arm.

"You are looking tired, Miss Levinge, you had better let me see you to your carriage."

He took her from the room, and placing her in her brougham, ordered her to drive home and to lie down.

CHAPTER XV

"Can't I take a rest? I feel like dropping."

Eliot Mayne shot a keen glance from the canvas on which he was working at the tired model, and then back again to the picture.

"I shan't keep you long now, Rosie," he said, "but I want to get the pose perfectly right this morning, and if you can stand still for a few minutes longer without fainting, you can rest as long as you like—and I promise not to mind if you charge me double this time!"

"Will you promise me something else?" asked the girl a minute later. "Will you promise not to get somebody else to sit for the hands?"

"Why?" he remarked indifferently.

The girl almost moved in her eagerness.

"Because if I can say I've sat to you for hands as well as bust and figure, lots of others will be certain to take me."

"Very well, I'll see what I can do."

"But I want you to promise," insisted the model.

"All right then, I promise. Now, another five minutes."

With a slight sigh the model resigned herself to the inevitable, while the artist, with bent brows and swiftly moving brush, worked intently at the exquisite nude figure which he intended to make the chief interest in his latest version of St. Anthony's Temptation, which was as nearly a sacred subject as Mayne's fleshly instincts could combine

with religious art without offending his own particular patrons. He worked rapidly, and already the canvas throbbed with actualities.

The model's throne was drawn into the very heart of the flood of sharp white light that flowed like an unrelenting sea through the great north window. Behind it was slung from the ceiling a curtain of canvas, quaintly coloured in faded distemper work. It looked like dull shot velvet in the morning radiance, and its dim shadows threw up in crude contrast the intense fairness of the model who, with airy pose and alluring gesture, represented the very crown of man's temptation—young and exquisitely beautiful womanhood. Scarcely draped by the cloud-like gauze scarf that lost its substance against the nacreous gleam of her flawless skin, the girl stood all unabashed by the exposed perfection of line and limb in the pitiless glare of the cold reflected light. Airily poised on one slender foot, she held out a beckoning hand.

"There!" said Mayne, suddenly rising; "That pose is perfect, but it's a strain I know. Now you may rest."

The naked girl stepped from the throne and stretched her stiffened muscles before dropping into a deep carved chair, over which a black bearskin was flung.

"Yes! it is a bit of a twister, that attitude, but you know I always like to go one better than the others, and this beats the Solomon girl."

"You mean 'Salome,' Rosie."

"Perhaps I do, but anyway they'll all know who sat for the temptress party, at the first glance. Rosie Graves all over! they'll say, and won't I have a crow over the other models at the Academy private view?"

"Well, they won't be far out, will they?" said Mayne, with a light laugh at the girl's social ambition, glancing from the figure on the canvas to the form of the girl in the

chair. With a tardy sense that she was not at work, Rosie drew the folds of the fur about her.

Mayne with light touches worked on the dark background as she sat and chattered.

"For goodness' sake give me a cigarette, or smoke yourself," said Rosie Graves suddenly. "This place of yours is beastly close this morning."

Mayne laid down his brushes, and drawing out a small silver cigarette case from his pocket, tossed it to the model.

"What rubbishy little things!" she cried with contempt, helping herself.

"Yes, they are small, and you're only going to get one of them to-day."

"Why so stingy?"

"I'm not stingy, my dear; you can take them all, but you mustn't smoke more than one here. A lady is coming to sit presently, and I don't suppose she'd care to find the studio reeking of smoke," replied Mayne.

A malicious gleam crept into the depths of Rosie Graves' velvety brown eyes, and the corners of her full scarlet mouth curled with glee.

"Ha! ha! that's why the place is all fixed up with flowers; I thought you hadn't been out buying lilies for me."

"I buy flowers for no one, Rosie, and you know it," said Mayne, assuming the austerity of the pictured saint before him.

"Oh! what about big Lisa?" cried Rosie, teasingly, as she blew a ring into the air, and slipped one pink-tipped finger through the filmy circlet. "She always brought no end of a bunch from here that time she and I and Emmie Smith were sitting to old Arundel for his 'Judgment of Paris.' She always came from you to him, and I used to see 'em. When she was in a good temper, we each got a flower."

Eliot Mayne laughed the curious little laugh that always implies admission to an impeachment of gallantry.

"Heavens! what an ideal Magdalen that woman was."

"Yes, for she always gave your flowers to young Marshall."

"Did she?"

"Rather."

"What's become of her?"

Rosie simpered with affected reticence before she spoke. "After she followed Bertie Vernon to New York and he threw her over, she joined some burlesque show out there. Teddy Cobbe—you know that scrubby little chap who's just joined the Newlyn lot—saw her with an awful snide crowd when he was in the States last summer. He said she'd dyed her hair yellow and gone fat, and she had come down to sitting to photographers and for 'living pictures.' Love and drink spoils 'em all," said Rosie, taking advantage of Mayne's abstraction to let her tongue run on, "Why, look at me, I've had my temptations as well as most of 'em, and I like a glass of fizz as much as anybody and had more chances of getting it, but I don't touch it, not me! I know better."

With the pride of a dealer who offers his best wares to a privileged customer, she shook the white beauties of her perfect body free from the soft fur covering and, drawing herself up to her full height, glanced lovingly at the delicious curves which swept in harmonious lines from her firm, rounded bosom to the slender ankles and blue-veined marble of her delicately arched feet.

"What's the result? They're falling over each other to get me to go to Paris, but as long as the pay keeps good and I haven't to go touting round Campden Hill and St. John's Wood for work, London's good enough for me. I'm saving a bit of money, and when I'm sick of the life, I

can marry an old Academician and sit to him. No models inside my house. Not me!"

But to his model's diatribes on the failings and ambitions of her profession, Mayne was deaf. Sunk in the luxurious depths of his great chair hung with old Spanish leather, he slipped into a waking dream, in which the rare bit of womanhood at his side had no entity. Through the faint blue wreaths of the curling smoke he sent his eyes travelling from the misty distance of the open oak roof, crossed and recrossed with straight square-cut beams, to the high level where the wood-work ended, and the plaster walls, painted a cold stone grey, began. In the first ardour of ascetic æstheticism, when he had nailed his *métier* to the painting of pale martyrs and repentant Magdalens, Mayne had thought that monastic surroundings and uncompromising outlines would blossom into radiant colour and never-fading beauty, as in the golden age of art.

In that early enthusiasm he had built his studio in the guise of those chill chapels where the pursuit of the divine is carried on under a form of penance for the human. But he found too soon that no monkish fire of faith touched his pencil, that he could not snatch inspiration from mere dreams of fair faces, of pure virgins, and of slaughtered saints. So by degrees the hard grey walls were lined with Eastern silks, strips of rare leathers, with fine panels of old carvings, and faces from the long-since dead hands of the great masters. In every degree of resignation, in every phase of torture, the saints and martyrs, the Christs and Virgins, and fair, frail Magdalens looked back at him with their meek eyes. Perhaps it was the recollection of the lost Lisa that made him appreciate, with a shadowy smile of self-scorn creeping round his bearded lips, that from the creations of his own brain and hands there emanated a subtle, indefinable suggestion of mockery, for his apostles

were merely satyrs, his Magdalens unrepentant. He had noticed it before, and the knowledge of the flesh that thrilled him at such times again angered him and spurred him from his purposeless thoughts.

"A quarter to eleven!" he cried suddenly, "Rosie, I'll give you ten minutes to get out of this. Hurry, there's a good girl."

With a shrug of her shapely shoulders Rosie Graves passed leisurely down the length of the great studio, to where a heavy screen of carved black oak marked the entrance to a tiny dressing-room. Among the devout old pictures and rich church hangings, which bore ecclesiastical emblems in every rich fold, through the picturesque confusion of inlaid chairs and old church coffers, she carried the glory of the world and the epitome of heaven, a woman's perfect beauty.

Even the brightness of the morning faded a little as she picked up her clothes, and the gleaming whiteness of her body was lost behind the dusky shadows of the black oak screen; yet Eliot Mayne breathed freer as she went, and in the breathing savoured the odour of tobacco, and of the strong perfume that the girl affected.

With fastidious haste he lit at the small glowing fire a score of scented joss-sticks, which he thrust in the pierced silver cover of an old thurible, swinging on finely chased silver chains from a bracket that Cellini might have chiselled. As the diaphanous blue smoke curled gently upwards, and mingled its pungent fragrance with the sweeter scent of the flowers, he murmured:

"That will get rid of the smell of tobacco."

He moved about, slowly re-arranging the white lilies which stood erect in vases of Japanese bronze in every corner of the studio. From among the dim shadows cast all about the wide fireplace by a baldachino of early Italian inlay

work, the flowers gleamed out like great shining stars, while beneath the big north window they had been arranged with mediæval stiffness, in a long row of single blossoms, that looked creamily transparent against the brilliant light.

"How strong they are. They've given me a headache already," he cried, and stretched his hand out to touch the cool white flowers, whose yellow tongues gave them the appearance of swans that had thrust up their heads from the reeds to be caressed.

A touch on his arm made him turn. Rosie, dressed for the street in a smart little frock of pale blue, stood at his elbow and smiled deliciously at him from under the wide brim of her hat.

"Give me a kiss for being such a good girl," she said prettily, and sliding up to him. "When are you going to take me out again?" she wheedled.

He laughed a little as he picked out her morning's wage from a handful of coin.

"You're an awful baby still, Rosie, though you are the best-made woman in London. There's your money and there's your kiss," and he lightly brushed her cheek with his lips. "Now, where do you want to go to-night?"

"Anywhere that's bright and jolly—one of the music-halls—and supper afterwards?" persisted the model.

"If you like."

"But no champagne, you know," she laughed.

"As you please, my girl."

Rosie Graves began to draw a pair of lemon-coloured gloves over her shapely hands.

"Who's the lady all the flowers are for?" she said suddenly, looking at Mayne through her lowered lashes.

"Merely a young lady who——"

"Is not going to sit for the temptress?" and Rosie nodded towards the St. Anthony.

"Good heavens, no!" cried Mayne vehemently.

"Not even the hands?" teased the girl.

"Of course not. Didn't I promise you——?"

"And she don't like tobacco?"

"Many young ladies don't."

Rosie tittered ostentatiously, and tossed her feathered hat.

"Then if she's so mighty particular about smells I advise you to open a window, for those burning things and all these flowers are enough to turn anybody faint."

"What nonsense. You're as fussy as a fine lady yourself. Now off you go!"

Raising herself on tiptoe to reach his superior height, she kissed him on the mouth, then ran laughing down the studio.

"Miss Levinge," announced the servant, and, as Rosie Graves whisked her pale-blue skirts through a side door, Eliot Mayne advanced to meet his sitter.

Mary, in a cool white linen gown and simple, broad-leaved hat, entered alone, bringing into the bizarre affectations and false art of the studio, now heavy with the mingling odours of lilies and the aromatic vapour of the burning incense, a delicious atmosphere of pure morning freshness.

"You are still determined to pose for the whole picture, Miss Levinge?" said Mayne, turning the just begun portrait of Mary, as the Holy Virgin, towards the light.

"Yes, if you please, Mr. Mayne. I should like the whole picture to be really me. I think Mr. Bawdon would wish it too, and I shall not at all mind sitting."

"I will make it as easy for you as possible. We will begin as soon as you have changed your dress for the one which you will find in this room."

A little later Mary came out of the dressing-room transformed from the young lady of to-day into a mediæval

maiden. Her unbound hair hung like a curtain of spun silk about her bare shoulders and open throat, where it made corn-coloured shadows. She wore a straight gown of soft white woollen, that fell in simple pleats from the low-cut round neckband to her sandalled feet. A high-backed chair was her seat upon the artist's throne. Across her knees, so delicately outlined by the draperies, Mayne laid a great sheaf of the heavy scented lilies, and round her feet they were clustered with such art that she herself seemed one of them, growing upwards in a very cloud of perfume. In her right hand she held sceptre-wise a tall green rod, crowned only with one blossom. It gleamed against the pale gold threads of her hair like frosted silver, and the petals brushed the pure outline of her cheek.

"It is lucky that Bawdon cannot see you now, Miss Levinge," said Mayne, as with his freshly set palette he took his place before the easel and began to paint.

"Why?" said Mary innocently.

"Oh! because he then would never be satisfied with my picture."

But Mary did not answer him. Already the fervour of reverence had fallen on her, and the world had drifted by, leaving her alone with the rapture of purity, and innocence of all save the joy of at last figuring in resemblance to the beloved picture of her early days, round which Martin Baird had wound so many beautiful legends. With her grey eyes fixed all unseeing before her, with her ears deaf to aught save singing angels and the formless suggestions of her own imagination, she sat, statue-like in stillness, and statue-like in white purity.

Her silence annoyed Mayne singularly. That a pretty woman should flout one of his compliments he was neither fool nor coxcomb enough to mind—as a general rule. But to-day he was nervous and vaguely irritable. The heavy

perfume of the flowers, the sickly odour of the incense, and the sweet spring air which made the birds build, and the leaves and blossoms break, warmed the blood in his veins, till his hand grew restless and his brain fantastic. The charm of the temptress he had been painting was over him, and between the Virgin on which he worked, and the sitter there floated the large, luscious red lips of the Lisa of long ago, and the smooth, warm, pink skin and ideal outlines of Rose. A hundred times he only cleared his throbbing brain by resting his burning eyes on the incarnation of young girlhood before him, but a hundred times Lisa and Rose mocked at him from the picture.

Once as he looked up he caught sight of the St. Anthony's Temptation, on which he had been working an hour back. It was so turned that only he could see it, and the flesh tints of the temptress gleamed from the misty background like a living woman.

Again he looked at his sitter. She was still enwrapt in her own thoughts and so immovable that the drapery over her bosom did not stir. How sweet in expression she was, how plaintive, and how like a child's was the sad droop of her mouth; and yet how exquisitely womanly, how desirable was that full line of her throat and the nascent curve of her bosom. How false, he thought, was his art compared to nature, as he realised that it is purity that is the tempter.

Sharply he turned his gaze away, to see Rose smiling at him from that other canvas, while her outstretched dimpled hands seemed to point at Mary and force his eyes back to her.

How fine and delicate were the fingers that held the lily wand, her sceptre of virginity, and how he envied the jealous sleeve that fell too low upon her arm. His eyes grew dark as he gazed and gazed again at her, as though he would have forced his thoughts upon her, and never at the picture

before him. Yet he was conscious of painting all the time, until that consciousness grew to artistic instinct, and for one moment dominated the man. He glanced at the canvas, then flushed with shame at the mocking outrage he had done the young girl by even allowing his brush to run riot in bosomfuls of warm light and cool shadows that only his mind's eye saw. With a hasty gesture he smudged his fingers across the still fresh paint, and in the act of doing so looked once more at Mary.

Was she asleep? Her head lay against the tall back of the chair, the pallor of her cheek was shadowed only by her lowered lashes. The hand that but a moment since had held the sceptre of maidenhood hung nerveless at her side, and the lilies had fallen from her knees all bruised to the floor.

Half-curious, half-frightened, he advanced and touched her shoulder gently, as though to waken her, but she did not move. He raised her soft fingers, but no pulse answered to his own. He laid one hand above her heart, almost fearful that it had ceased to beat; but it throbbed feebly under his lingering touch, and he knew then that she had swooned. The cloying sweetness of her much-loved flowers had strangled her and blanched her lips and cheeks to their own stainless pallor. He raised her in his arms and carried her to the couch in the alcove. As he laid her down her gold hair made an aureole of faint light about the whiteness of her face. A spray of lilies he had caught up with her fell crushed and dying to the ground.

She did not move, and scarcely seemed to breathe. He went hastily to the door, intent on summoning aid. He hesitated. "Would there be gossip and talk if he called?" he asked himself. His fingers, made nerveless by indecision, fell upon the key instead of the handle he had sought. Once again he paused, then slowly turned the key, and went back on tiptoe to where she lay, white among the

cushions as a drift of pure snow in the purple hollows of the hills.

He gazed on her till the impulse grew too strong, and, bending down, he caught the fair face between his two hot palms and kissed the girl long and passionately on the lips.

CHAPTER XVI

THE next day was Sunday.

The March morning had broken grey and cold. An easterly wind had sprung up in the night, and now drove a dirty scud from the North Sea across the drab hued heavens. The mating birds piped dolefully to each other in the sparsely foliaged trees, and the early flowering lilacs in the sheltered garden of Holmhurst showered down a mauve rain of shattered blossoms as each stormy gust passed by.

Mary was in her sitting-room, a dainty nest with windows looking to the south and west. The furniture and hangings were pale in colour and showed a vague opalescence of silver greys and shaded greens and pinks against the white walls. Giant palms and flowers in gorgeous masses lent to the room a sensation of space and atmosphere, which was enhanced by the cloud-flecked painted blue ceiling, across which a flight of swallows trailed, and a branch of rosy fruit blossom swayed airily. On the white walls hung a few pictures: a perfect Corot, a Turner which palpitated with the crimson and golden glow of a setting sun, a scrap of Norfolk as seen by Gainsborough's eyes, all pearl-grey and willow-green, and such other landscapes as had caught the girl's fancy or appealed to her taste.

Set in a shallow niche between two silver vases filled with white roses and shadowed by the interlacing branches of two tall palms was the little picture of the Madonna, which had been taken from the art gallery when Mary moved into her new home. A *prie-Dieu*, carved by an Italian

master hand, and a narrow shelf edged with a lace that once had trimmed a Cardinal's robe, were before the picture. A single Eucharist lily, spotless and waxen, and a golden crucifix lay on the shelf. From beneath the verdant arch of towering palms the fair face, meekly beautiful, and framed by the veil of cunningly painted gauze, gleamed like a living thing, while the watery sun-rays, fighting through the hurrying cloud-rack, struck faint glints of light from the roughly chased clasp on the girlish breast.

Kneeling on the low praying-chair, with her head pressed close against the glass, as in her most childish days, was Mary. The tender light, filtering through the broad leaves, cast the same reflection across the picture and girl, and embraced both in an atmosphere of mysticism. Mary was very pale, colourless as wax, save for the soft velvety shadow cast by her long lashes, and the faint tracery of her delicate eyebrows. In the shifting light of the chill March day the waved masses of her hair, coiled low in the hollow of her neck, lost their sanguine, auburn tints, and looked white as bleached flax against the green pallor of her skin.

Her eyes, darkened almost to a sapphire-blue beneath their full lids, were as the eyes of one who had gazed beyond the limits of a fleshly world and had seen the invisible. As with rapt, upturned look she strove to pierce the calm depths of the mild pictured face, to force the truth and the secret from the sweet, mute mouth, her own pale features were transfigured with a great hope and a mighty fear, a premonition of fulfilment, and the anticipation of a realised desire.

The room was very still, for the fire had burned itself into a pulsating mass, while from the girl's lips, which moved from time to time, no sound came to mar the silence of the warm, flower-scented atmosphere.

In fragrant quietude the morning hours melted into noon,

and Mary knelt on, so statue-still in her white gown beneath the green shadow of the branching palms, that even the striking of mid-day and the sharp roll of a carriage beneath the windows failed to rouse her from her reverie.

"Lady St. Cyprien—Lady Theo Bellastier," announced a servant, and amid a rustle of silken skirts the ladies swept into the room.

With a violent start and a hot flush staining her fair skin, Mary sprang to her feet with the look and motion of a child caught in an act of disobedience.

"I hope you got my note yesterday, dear," cried Lady St. Cyprien, as she picked her way among the flower-laden tables and broad low chairs towards Mary, who stood in the shadows like a pale lily tinged with a golden-green. "St. Cyprien was not well, and I could not leave him, even to take you to Mr. Mayne's studio. But are you not ready for the Park? It's much nicer out than it looks, but—what is the matter?"

Lady St. Cyprien gazed with loving, anxious eyes at Mary, who, as the startled blush died from her face, grew as white as her gown.

"Have you a headache, Mary? You are so pale, and your hands and lips burn like fire."

Lady Theo, who had been winning heavily at the card-table till five in the morning, and felt horribly seedy and plain, involuntarily wondered if Mary, too, had kept late hours.

"I am not ill, dear Lady St. Cyprien, but—I cannot go to the Park this morning," said Mary in a low, constrained manner.

"Just as you please, my dear," said Lady St. Cyprien with admirable good humour and tact, for her eyes and ears had caught at once the signs of overstrained nerves in the bearing of the girl. "We will give up the Park for to-day.

In fact, I think you show very commendable discretion, Mary, in not draining dry at the very commencement of the season the rather over-estimated delights of church parade. Few girls of your age have any sense of restraint. But as you must have some air, we'll forsake the haunts of fashionable man and woman, and go north and make an exploration of Hampstead."

Lady Theo was looking as yellow as a duck's foot, and the glory of her fine eyes was for the time so hopelessly dimmed by late hours, bad air, and excitement, that she in her heart desired nothing better than to temporarily avoid her fellow-kind, and she endorsed Lady St. Cyprien's suggestion at the top of her high-pitched voice.

But Mary shook her blond head.

"I cannot drive to-day, thank you. I do not wish to leave the house."

The little catch of smothered emotion in her voice as she spoke, and the twisting and untwisting of her slender fingers among the folds of her white crêpe gown, warned the Countess that an hysterical outbreak was threatening.

Lady St. Cyprien's dark eyes peered in vain beneath the shadow of the broad palm leaves. She could only catch the oval outline of the pale face and the scarcely suppressed twitch of the childish mouth.

Suddenly a great splash of brilliant sunshine, all the more harshly intense by contrast with the rolling purple clouds, flooded the room and bathed the girl from head to foot in a very sea of golden glory.

With the rending of the veil of merciful verdant twilight, the last remnant of Mary's self-control fell from her, and Lady St. Cyprien was shocked to see the convulsed face and trembling form rocking and heaving before her in all the pitiless glare of the sharp, high light.

To continue to feign an ignorance of Mary's hysterical

condition was impossible; but the shocked surprise of Lady St. Cyprien's face gave the girl an impression that her friend still purposed to make her go out for a drive.

"I cannot leave home to-day," she gasped, in a strangled voice. "I dare not go—the Angel—the Vision—it might appear again—I——"

Lady St. Cyprien drew herself up to the full extent of her stately height, and set her gentle voice to its sternest key.

"Mary, you are giving way to absurd ideas, and encouraging yourself in ridiculous fancies. Theo, fetch the salts from Mary's room; they are always on her dressing-table. Angels! Visions! Do you know, my dear, you are talking nonsense—and quite wicked nonsense into the bargain? Now, don't let me hear any more about such rubbish."

It hurt her intensely to speak sharply to her *protégée;* but the principle which actuates every woman of the world to cling in life or death to her fetish, "self-control," and an earnest desire to combat the girl's neurotic tendencies, urged her to such ungracious speech.

With a supreme effort of will Mary forced her face into some semblance of quiescence, but the heavy tears gathered in her eyes, and she held two fluttering little hands out to her friends.

"Don't be angry with me. You would not if you only knew. It is no fancy that has come to me—no dream or vain imagining. The truth is no chimera, a promise is not to be broken; and the truth and the promise were given me to-day at the moment of the dawn."

The shed tears glistened on her cheeks and the laces at her throat like diamonds. The outstretched hands ceased to fluttering meek supplication, her voice grew steady as with a great purpose.

"Let me tell you, my dearest friend—my almost mother

—of the wonderful thing which has come to me: a thing so marvellous, that I am joyful; a thing so mysterious, that I am frightened. Sit, Lady Theo, sit, and I will tell you."

A fever burned brightly in her cheeks; her eyes, generally so placid and grave, shone like twin stars. In the clear sunlight she stood, with her hands folded before her, and in low tones, like one who talks in dreams, she spoke.

"I had slept, oh! so soundly, all the night through. I had not dreamt; I do not think I had stirred. Yet I awoke very suddenly, as though a voice or a touch had startled me. I did not move—and I did not even wonder why I woke. The soft grey of daybreak was gleaming in faint silver lines about the edges of the curtains. It was quite early, and all the world seemed to be waiting and watching with me. A soulful peace, an intense stillness of anticipation filled my whole being. Time and the sense of living slipped from me. I could have waited through eternity. Then as the day-dawn flushed to a fuller strength, and filled my room with pearly gleams and shifting shadows, the Message came."

She closed her eyes and sighed in the intensity of her beatitude. A smile of divinest happiness curved her mouth, and her lips stirred in inaudible thanksgiving.

Lady St. Cyprien would have started from her chair but that Lady Theo, wide-eyed and a little awestruck, laid one hand on her arm.

"Hush, Adela! let Mary finish."

Mary spoke again, always in low, short sentences and with closed eyes as though she saw again the Vision of the Dawn.

"They grew, those two figures, from mere nothingness. I looked, and they were not there; I looked again, and they were there. One knelt, with low-bowed head and meek crossed hands. The hair was very fair, and glinted like

pale gold where the light caught it. It knelt on, and prayed. Like the sigh of a summer breeze, the prayer swept to my ears. It was a prayer for forgiveness, for mercy, for redemption. It was the prayer of millions of sinners, the prayer of a lost nation, the prayer of one weak girl. It throbbed, and rose, and fell like the murmur of a sea, till it filled the whole room, and beat in saddest supplication against my very heart."

From beneath her lowered lashes two tears slipped down her cheeks.

"Yet the figure never moved. It prayed on and on—always for mercy and for redemption—and as I heard and watched, the dawn grew brighter. Then a great Presence came, grand, awful, yet formless. The light of all the stars shone about it, the odours of white lilies filled the air, and from the lilies and the light came a voice. 'Hail!' it cried like a silver bell. 'Hail! thou to whom the messenger of mercy is sent. Blessed art thou among women.' Then—ah! then the most wonderful thing of all happened—she who had prayed and importuned so long, did lift her face up towards the angel—and—and—the face was that of the picture—it was the face of—myself."

The girl's voice had grown shrill with nervous excitement as she finished, and she staggered forward into Lady St. Cyprien's arms, utterly overcome with emotion.

"Open the window, Theo—get some water."

Lady Theo, with her pert face preternaturally grave, obeyed, and in a few minutes Mary roused from her exhaustion and smiled wanly. Then Lady St. Cyprien walked across to the dying fire and stared with sombre eyes into the cooling ashes. She was more moved than she chose to admit—even to her common-sense self—by the girl's story. Not that she believed in it for one moment, but she noted the conviction with which Mary regarded it, and the hold

which the self-imagined idea had taken of her. Despite her own peculiarly unimaginative temperament, and practical worldliness, she had sufficient sympathy with youth to make all allowance for the heart fancies and soulful ambitions of the young people of her acquaintance. That a young man should desire a maiden for the colour of her hair, or the shape of her mouth, she could understand; that a girl shoud flout a coronet and diamonds for the *beaux yeux* of a soldier or the suave tongue and empty pockets of a barrister, was foolish—but natural, and oh! so very easily cured and so easily understood.

But the mystical yearnings, the vaguely voiced desires of this beautiful Jewish girl, were strange and almost uncanny. Lady St. Cyprien had the sincerest, deepest love for Mary Levinge, but her origin and the race from which she sprang had no part in that love, and the indefinite desires which Mary sometimes evinced for the welfare of her own people, were in the Countess's eyes mere girlish sentimentalities, which should be quickly eradicated.

That Mary was still clinging to her childish fancies was vexatious. Hysteria was bad for the health, and neurotic whims fatal to the appearance and temper of a young lady. Lady St. Cyprien had always hoped for a happy girlhood and delightful marriage for her favourite. How could either be accomplished under existing circumstances?

And now there was Theo, who was always excitable, overstrung and feverishly on the lookout for new sensations, questioning Mary.

"Where did this Manifestation take place?" she was asking in an awestruck voice. "Show me the exact spot. It may appear again."

Mary rose quickly, her eyes alight with fervour, her whole body quivering with responsive excitement.

"Theo, I am ashamed of you," cried Lady St. Cyprien

sharply, turning from the fire. "You should know better than to encourage Mary. She is not well, and this picture of Bawdon's and all the talk she hears at the studio about art and religion upset her."

Then she turned again to Mary, and with firm, kindly hands tried to force her back into her chair.

"How can you be fit to continue your sittings to Mr. Mayne, if you permit yourself such disturbing fancies? Remember, my dear, that a nervous, highly wrought model will not at all fulfil Mr. Bawdon's notion of the fitness of things."

But her words fell on deaf ears. Mary, with her eyes ablaze with excitement and followed by Lady Theo, whose sallow cheeks were quite scarlet, slipped from the Countess's restraining hands and went into the bedroom and with reverence indicated the very spot where the Vision had been.

Lady Theo stared hard as though she expected the Manifestation to appear again.

"Ah! Mary!" she cried ecstatically, clasping her small, well-gloved hands. "I think it must be coming again. I can smell the scent of the lilies."

Lady St. Cyprien's face grew very hard and stern, and nothing but the enraptured look in Mary's eyes stayed the angry words that rose to her lips.

Suddenly her eyes caught a crushed spray of lilies of the valley on the edge of the dressing-table.

"Here are your lilies, Theo," she cried, catching up the sickly smelling blossoms. "A bunch of dead rubbish. Mary, my dear girl, the thoughts of your portrait, the glitter of the dawn on your cut glass scent-bottles, and a few faded flowers are at the bottom of your vision. Don't let me hear any more about it. Come along Theo, I will drive you home—and Mary, keep quiet this afternoon and try to sleep. You will not be fit for anything all the week, if you do not."

But once in the carriage the Countess lapsed into thoughtful silence, and Lady Theo addressed her twice before she could get a reply.

"Well, my dear, well! What is it you want to know?"

"About Mary," said Lady Theo, in a rather subdued manner. "Is she—is she quite right, do you think?"

Lady St. Cyprien turned sharply on her companion.

"Theo, never suggest—never even insinuate anything against Mary Levinge. The girl is as pure as an angel, and as good as gold. Her lonely and uncongenial surroundings have encouraged her rather in this fancy about the Madonna, and the business of this picture, which I do not like at all, have reawakened a childish whimsey. But once give her healthy objects in life, an affectionate husband—and, please God—a little child, and Mary will be the happiest and sanest woman in England."

A serious expression was the most unbecoming thing in the world to Lady Theo Bellastier, and she knew it, but for the life of her she could not force a smile to her lips as she said timidly:

"But, Adela, suppose Mary should not be fanciful at all. You needn't look so cross about it; but you know that the Jews consider the prophecy about the coming of a Redeemer has yet to be fulfilled. If such a child is to be born, some one must be its mother, you know; and Mary——"

"I insist, Theo, that you shall not pursue this crazy notion, any further. Besides, who ever heard of a miracle nowadays?"

"It does not follow that there should not be one," was Lady Theo's parting shot as she alighted at her door in Wilton Place.

That same afternoon Martin Baird called to see Mary.

The gloaming shadows filled the great house as he passed

unattended up the stairs, and softly tapped at the door of her sitting-room.

It was opened from within. Tall, and like a pale spirit, the girl stood against the dim, rich background.

"I cannot speak with you to-night. I must be alone. Only, Martin, pray for me!"

The sweet low voice floated out, and a white hand fluttered towards him through the gloom. Then the door was gently closed and he stood a lonely figure in the dark corridor.

And she went back to her vigil in the dim room, where only the pale twin faces of herself and the picture gleamed whitely.

CHAPTER XVII

Early in July Mary Levinge gave her last sitting to Eliot Mayne for the picture of the Immaculate Conception. As a portrait the work was perfectly faithful, as a picture Mr. Erastus Bawdon and the leading art critics pronounced it a masterpiece of realism in art and fulfilment.

Following the traditions of the pre-Raphaelite school Mayne had not robed his Virgin in costly embroideries and heavy velvets, nor posed her in a marble court amid carven pillars. In the middle of a small bare room, in the very heart of a river of sunshine, which poured through a narrow slit in the rough clay wall, sat the girl, her long, slim limbs clad only in a shapeless garment of white woollen. The brilliant sunlight shone like molten gold through the waxen lilies that surrounded her, and glowed rose-red across the delicately arched bare feet. Her unbound hair, pale yellow about the temples and ruddy auburn in the shadows, fell round her shoulders. Translucent and intangible, the angel Gabriel floated in the sunlight. A white dove hung on outspread wings between the angel and the Virgin.

As time had passed Mary had approached each sitting in a spirit of extraordinary reverence, which Eliot Mayne had at first been inclined to consider as nothing more than the affected pose of a rather hysterical girl. But as the weeks went by his opinion changed, and the more spiritual side of his unstable nature caught the infection of her fervour.

"The picture had need be good," he said one evening to Mr. Erastus Bawdon, as the artist, smoking an uncompromis-

ing pipe and the *dilettante* amateur a dainty, gold-tipped cigarette, stood before the easel. "The picture had need be good, for I have painted my very soul into it. Miss Levinge's individuality is very strong, and she has endowed the subject with a peculiar reality, which I don't mind confessing to you now, Bawdon, it never held for me before."

Mr. Erastus Bawdon's heavy face assumed a somewhat shocked expression.

"I mean no irreverence to the foundation of the Christian belief, but simply that, except from a purely artistic point of view, the motive of the Annunciation never appealed to me at all. It always was limited in my eyes to a mere allegory."

The artist flung himself into his favourite chair, and with his eyes still fixed on the picture said presently:

"Tell me, Bawdon, what made you settle upon Miss Levinge as a true type for your Virgin? Lady Theo Bellastier is a charming little woman, and her parties are fairly good fun, as parties go nowadays, but hers is scarcely the house in which one would expect to find a saint."

Erastus Bawdon slowly took a seat before he answered.

"Initially the girl's face attracted me," he began, in his deep, rolling tones. "Without being either classically beautiful or insipidly pretty, it is extraordinarily attractive, being pure in outline and charming in colouring, if somewhat pale. But it was not until I looked at her a second time that I saw beneath the delicate formation of nose and the striking width of brow the spirit which dominated her life and set her apart from other women, as being worthy to be the model for the Mary. I felt that the martyred saints had thought her thoughts, and had looked at the world with such eyes as hers."

"Her features are wonderfully like those of Botticelli's Holy Virgin in the National Gallery, but Miss Levinge has

at times more strength of expression than one can ever find in that lovely face. She told me the other day, though, that she has always been considered very like a small picture in Botticelli's earlier manner, which came into her grandfather's possession, and which she now has, and seems to prize beyond everything."

"I have seen the picture," said Bawdon. "It is a very beautiful, though entirely unsigned bit of work. The likeness Miss Levigne speaks of is quite remarkable—or rather was. Miss Levinge has not looked well lately."

Mayne knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and drew a cloth over the picture before he answered.

"I am not surprised," he said. "If you could only see her sometimes when she is posing, you would wonder that she is not really ill. She will sit immovable upon that stage of mine with her loosened hair, and her flower-filled hands, and those peculiarly shaped eyes of hers fixed wherever I tell her. Then after a time her whole face becomes transfigured. She seems as though she were entranced, and were herself in truth beholding a vision and enduring the sufferings of the Virgin Mother. More than once I have had to touch her to rouse her from her condition of intense feeling. Sometimes it has been as though I were gazing at the first scene of the World's Tragedy. No wonder the girl looks worn and ill—I know that I myself am exhausted after the sittings. I shall not be sorry when the picture is finished."

Mr. Erastus Bawdon lifted the veil and took on more look at the canvas.

"I think," he said reflectively, "that Miss Levinge will one day become converted to the true faith. It would be a triumph. She shall be received in my church."

Then he left.

And now the last sitting, a very short one, was ended,

and Mary Levinge stood before the picture which mingled art and fervour had evolved.

"It is very beautiful. It touches me to the soul," she said quietly. "But, Mr. Mayne, am I really like that? I have always thought of myself as being like that other picture of which I have told you. But this face seems strangely unfamiliar. Am I like that?"

Eliot Mayne looked from the picture to the white-robed girl who stood before it.

"Yes," he said presently. "You are like this. Yet, now I come to think of it, I have touched the face often lately. Your expression is more etherealized than when you first sat, four months ago. It is as if you had so absorbed the sensations of the Virgin Mary into your own being, that the shadows and lines of approaching sorrow had painted themselves about your eyes and mouth."

The girl's lips began to work nervously, and her eyes to fill with tears.

"My dear child!" said Mayne, unaffectedly moved by her emotion and laying a gentle hand on Mary's shoulder. "You have taken this picture too much to heart, and overstrained yourself during the sittings. Your artistic anxieties to help me in my work have told on your nerves."

Then he gave her a kindly smile, and went on in a brighter tone:

"Besides, you are not saying good-bye to the picture for ever, you know. Mr. Bawdon hopes you will see it often in the future. He has great dreams of converting you—ah, that makes you smile. That's right, that's right. Mouths like yours are made for laughter," he said lightly, returning to his rather artificial manner. "Grief on a young face looks out of place."

So Mary, with a wan smile about her mouth, and her tears forced back in their channels, left with her maid Eliot

Mayne's dim, cool house on Campden Hill and drove through the fret and steam and heat of the July noon, by the crowded Kensington High Street and through the already parched alleys of the Park, to Knightsbridge and Lowndes Square.

"Her ladyship will be in to luncheon at two," said Lady St. Cyprien's butler, as he ushered Mary into the perfumed dusk of the boudoir, which lay at the back of the big drawing-rooms.

The windows were so closely darkened, and so great was the contrast to the glaring streets, that had she not known the room well, Mary must have felt her way among the furniture As it was, she crept softly into the depths of a cool, chintz-covered chair. A great weariness of body fell on her as she half sat, half lay among the cushions, and again the unaccountable desire to cry, which had almost choked her in the studio, swept over her. With a scarcely suppressed sob, she bowed her face among the cold, velvety petals of a bowl of yellow roses which stood next her chair. Two tears, that scorched her eyelids as they came, fell on the dew-laden blossoms.

She was on the verge of a burst of weeping, when the firm, quick steps of a man rang through the empty drawing-rooms.

"Miss Levinge, where have you hidden yourself in this Cimmerian gloom?" cried Lord Stansdale's cheery voice from the curtained doorway. "Ford told me you were up here, but I certainly can't see you."

Mary brushed her handkerchief across her burning eyes, and after a moment said in a faint voice:

"I am here, Lord Stansdale."

"Ah! I can guess your whereabouts now—you are in Aunt Adela's big chair by the piano. Well, I will come over to you—if I can."

But whether by accident or design, Lord Stansdale moved

in the direction of the windows, and suddenly raising an outer blind, let in a flood of hot, white light.

Mary gave a little cry, and placed her hands before her eyes.

"Too much glare, eh?" said Stansdale. "Well, I'll try half measures." He quickly lowered the blinds till a tender twilight filled the little room. Then he went over to Mary and sat down.

He was sincerely in love with her, and for a moment was content to gaze at her.

She had pulled off her hat on entering the room, and it lay, a dainty mass of white tulle and filmy lace, in her lap. Her hair was a little ruffled, and had fluffed itself into a cloud of disorderly pale-gold curls about her brows and ears. The uncertain light hid, even from love's eyes, all traces of emotion.

Stansdale thought she looked very sweet, and the phlegm of his English nature was stirred. He felt the necessity of urging his suit bubbling to his lips.

"Let me put your hat down somewhere, Miss Levinge," he began, taking it from her lap. "How some women contrive to impress their personality on the things they wear! Do you know, I could never bear white until I saw you in it? It always seems too cold and expressionless for ordinary women, but for you——"

He paused. Sincere compliments did not trip easily from his reticent tongue.

"I cannot imagine you in anything else."

Mary uttered an idly interrogative "No?"

She entertained a genuine friendship for Lady St. Cyprien's handsome nephew. She liked his company, and looked for his attendance at dances, the Opera, and in the Park. That he regarded her with feelings any different from her own had never seriously occurred to her, though

more than once she had deprecated the Countess's hints that Lord Stansdale would make her a suitable husband.

So, with never a flutter at her heart, or a quickening flush in her cheeks, she lay back in Lady St. Cyprien's chair, with half-closed eyes and wandering thoughts. A touch on her hand, a new, a deeper tone in her companion's voice roused her to a sense of what was coming.

"Miss Levinge—Mary—I have for so long admired you—latterly I have learned to love. Your sweetness and your beauty make you worthy of any position the world can offer you. Will you take the one that I can give you? Will you be my wife?"

Lord Stansdale spoke awkwardly. The inherent shyness of his race and cultivated reserve of his class tied his tongue. True love surged from his heart to his throat, but could get no further. Yet feebly as his desires were conveyed Mary understood him. He wished to marry her. The physical disgust she had felt at Eugene Cohen's proposal did not overtake her now. She was overwhelmed with a great wave of pity—for herself and for him—that she could not bring her lips to frame a "Yes!" or her hands to return his clasp.

She shook her head.

"I cannot marry you, although, believe me, Lord Stansdale, I am sensible of the honour you are doing me."

"You do not love me, then!" he cried, his passion rising at the check. "But do not refuse me now. Let me love you for a little time, let me be your servant, your slave, till one day you will care for me, and your regard grows to love. Then I will ask you again for your hand and for your heart, and you will be mine."

He essayed to clasp her hands, but she rose and for a moment eluded him.

"Ah! Lord Stansdale, if I could choose a husband from among all men, I would have you."

He sprang towards her, but she slipped from him again.

"But I entreat you not to wait, not to hope."

She spoke in a broken voice. If she could only put her fears and longings and doubts from her, if she could only give herself and her future to this *debonair* gentleman, with his frank, blue eyes and strong, kind hands. The fierce longing for happiness which comes to all young things overwhelmed her for a moment.

Unconsciously, and with half-closed eyes, she surged like a breaking lily towards him. With a cry of joy, he caught her to his heart, and rained a hundred kisses on her pale face.

"Oh! no! no! you mistake—leave me—I—" came in gasps from the girl's lips.

With frail hands set against his breast she tried to free herself from his embrace.

"My love! my sweetest love! my wife!" murmured Stansdale passionately in her reluctant ears.

Then childish tears came, and he was about to loose her when Lady St. Cyprien entered quickly. Her woman's wit, and the knowledge of Mary Levinge's coy aversion to marriage, gave her the key to the situation.

"Stansdale and Mary," she cried. "My dear boy—a thousand congratulations. Your uncle will be delighted. Mary——" she took the girl from Stansdale's arms and, clasping her to her own heart, kissed her very tenderly—"Mary, my dearest, dearest child—you have made me the happiest woman in London."

There were tears in her voice and in her dark eyes as she placed the girl in a chair and began to soothe her.

"Now my dear, do not talk—I can guess all you would say. Stansdale has loved you for months but has feared to speak. Now I am glad the secret is told. He will have the loveliest and the best wife in the world, and you will

find what you deserve—a loyal heart, a true friend—and that best of all blessings for a woman—an affectionate husband."

For a moment Mary looked from Lady St. Cyprien to Lord Stansdale. Then with a faint sigh, half of weariness, half of happiness, she let her hands fall in her lap. Perhaps marriage with a good man was her destiny after all. Perhaps all the rest was but futile longing.

She sighed again, a long sobbing sigh, that shook her frame. Her lifetime's dreams were shattered, dispelled, gone. She turned her face to Lady St. Cyprien to be kissed, and then held out one hand to her lover.

The rest of the day was passed in a whirl. Lady St. Cyprien, who plumed herself on having turned the scale of Mary's wandering decision, for the girl's ultimate benefit, felt that the next best thing was to give her no time for reflection. With the kindest motives therefore she drove her out during the afternoon, sent for her maid and an evening gown from Holmhurst to Lowndes Square, superintended her toilette, took her to the opera and a couple of crushes, and only left her at her own door, numbed with bewilderment and aching with fatigue, at two o'clock the next morning.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was late when Mary awoke in the morning. The flame which burnt beneath the chocolate pot at her bedside had flickered out long ago, and the jug for hot milk when she touched it was stone cold.

She rang her bell sharply and then dropped back among her pillows. In spite of her hours of heavy, dreamless sleep, she ached dully in all her limbs, and her eyes and head were heavy and hot. Too tired to remember, too physically weary to think of aught but her own discomfort, she did not move till the maid brought in some fresh chocolate, and after having poured it out, laid the morning's post and newspapers on the bed.

Sipping at the chocolate, Mary with idle fingers turned over her letters. None were of interest till the sixth and last. As she caught sight of the crest and coronet, and the bold, square superscription on the cover, she put down her cup with a clatter, and with dilated eyes and burning cheeks stared at the thick cream-tinted envelope.

Then it all came back to her; that scene in the shaded, cool boudoir, where among the roses and the old-fashioned chintzes, Lord Stansdale had wooed her and clasped her hands and kissed her lips. She dashed angry, quivering fingers across her mouth at the recollection.

And then Lady St. Cyprien had come in, and in another moment, almost without her knowledge, all had been settled.

"They mean it for the best, but are they right? Am I wrong?" she sighed.

With weary indifference she opened her other letters, but the seal of Lord Stansdale's envelope remained unbroken. Perhaps it was a last faint hope that her engagement might not be irrevocably binding that prevented her, in honour, from reading the love vows of a man she might after all not marry.

With equal lack of interest she turned to the *Morning Post* and glanced down the columns of the centre page. The two big parties she had attended the previous evening were mentioned, and the fixtures for the coming day were duly set forth with formal particularity. Then came a separate paragraph, in the leaded type which is generally reserved for special news.

"We are authorised to state that a marriage has been arranged, and will shortly take place, between Viscount Stansdale, of 99 Curzon Street, and The Dales, Yorkshire, and Miss Mary Levinge, of Holmhurst, Regent's Park."

She read the announcement through three times, very slowly. It did not strike her to question who had sent it to the paper, or even to cavil at it being there. It was made, that was enough.

Quite quietly, and with no shadow of emotion, no signs of maidenly modesty, or joy, or grief marring the pale tranquillity of her face, she laid the paper aside and took up Lord Stansdale's letter.

He was to be her husband, she was to be his wife—the affair was settled. Now she might read what he had to say.

It was a chivalrous, manly letter, breathing as much gratitude as love, and more sincere devotion than either. It was very short and simple. Most girls whose heads are filled with idealisms would have called it bald and cold,

but for Mary it was sufficient. The very simplicity and straightforwardness of expression appealed to her and touched her more than a thousand fulsome compliments and passionate asseverations would ever have done.

With Stansdale's letter in her hand Mary Levinge dropped the curtain on the past. The vague aspirations of her childhood's days, dreamed amid the relics of all time in the Art Gallery, the more fully formulated desires of later years, she put behind her with hands that trembled though they never faltered.

With her lover's words of truth and loyalty before her, she faced the future. She would strive to be a wife worthy of his station and affection.

"Pray God give me strength!" she murmured with clasped hands.

Then she rose, and thrusting her little feet into soft white slippers, she crossed the room.

Suddenly a great shock thrilled her from head to foot.

An irrepressible cry of terror broke from her lips, her face was distorted with a mighty fear.

Again—and yet once again!

Then all grew dark, and with pale hands fighting the overwhelming waters of her fate, she fell on her knees and prayed.

CHAPTER XIX

Lady St. Cyprien and her maid were half-way through that careful toilette which made the former pre-eminent among the best-dressed women of the day, when a pencilled note was brought into her dressing-room.

"I must see you at once.—Mary."

Lady St. Cyprien smiled a little as she read the hastily scribbled words.

"She's seen the announcement in the *Post*, of course, and is a little put out, I dare say. It was sharp practice on my part, I admit, but she is such an undecided creature that she wants some one to make up her mind for her. How she'll bless me by the time she's been six months married."

Then she turned to the waiting servant.

"Tell Miss Levinge's messenger I will be at Holmhurst in less than an hour. And order the victoria round as quickly as possible."

Lady St. Cyprien was fully prepared to cope with Mary's girlish arguments against the publicly announced engagement and a speedy marriage. She intended to treat all scruples as mere caprice, which a little affectionate firmness would quickly override. She was therefore rather put out to hear from the servant who admitted her that Miss Levinge was still in her room.

"Miss Levinge is not ill, I hope," she said anxiously.

"I do not know, milady. Nobody has seen Miss Levinge this morning but her maid, Carter."

Lady St. Cyprien passed quickly up the broad shallow stairs, and a moment later was standing in Mary's bedroom.

With her hair still unbrushed and tossed in flaxen masses about her shoulders, her feet bare, and only a loose white wrapper pulled round her, Mary sat pale and mute in a deep chair.

She gave a long sigh of satisfaction as Lady St. Cpyrien entered, but neither spoke nor moved, and it was her visitor who first broke the silence.

"My dearest child, you sent for me, and I have come. What is the matter? Are you vexed about the announcement in the papers? You know such news is always put about at once. People like to hear it."

But no word came from the silent, seated figure.

Certainly she must be ill. Lady St. Cyprien looked at her and gradually became filled with the consciousness of some subtle sudden change in the girl's face and bearing. The well-cut features, the pure eyes, the sweet expression were unaltered, yet there was a difference since yesterday.

"Are you not well? Is anything the matter? Speak, Mary."

A growing fear that the girl was mentally, if not physically, ill, lent a unusual sharpness to Lady St. Cyprien's voice.

Mary rose slowly, lifting herself by pressing her hands upon the arms of the chair, as though a great weakness or a new fragility had come upon her.

"I cannot marry Lord Stansdale."

She spoke very quietly, permitting herself neither any gesture nor display of emotion. Her arms hung straightly at her sides, but her head was proudly set, and she looked at the Countess with eyes that never faltered or quailed.

"Mary, I do not understand; I cannot permit you, for a mere whim, to wreck——"

"I cannot marry Lord Stansdale."

Low and steady the girl's incisive words cut across the other's agitated tones.

Lady St. Cyprien drew nearer, her keen dark eyes searching every feature of Mary's impassive face, every outline of her slender form, as though she would force her reasons from her.

Suddenly she drew back. Knowledge came to her, and she understood.

A look of divinest pity—the purest sympathy that one woman can feel for another—swept over her face. She opened her arms wide.

"Mary, my darling, my poor, poor child," she cried.

And Mary, with a little sob, crept like a tired child to her heart, and the two women wept together.

Mary was the first to repress her emotion. With a dignity that was pathetic in its forced self-control she withdrew herself from Lady St. Cyprien's arms, and, brushing the last tears from her lashes, said, for the third time, "I cannot marry Lord Stansdale."

Lady St. Cyprien in her turn dried her eyes, but, though all outward signs of grief were suppressed, her face was aged and drawn with a look of infinite sorrow as she led Mary back to her chair and seated herself beside her.

And in truth Lady St. Cyprien had cause enough to grieve, though after the first moment she dwelt no longer on the disappointment the broken engagement would be to Stansdale, Lord St. Cyprien, and herself. Momentarily it was bitter in her mouth, then it was forgotten for ever, swallowed up in the greater shock of her discovery.

Kind-hearted, gentle-souled though she was, Lady St. Cyprien had small faith in the virtue of her own class. The knowledge had been forced upon her, despite herself, ever since the days when she had made her *débût* into

society. But she was herself essentially too clean-minded and charitable a woman to gloat over the weaknesses of her order. It was sad enough and bad enough to know that all wives were not faithful, all daughters pure.

But in the truth, the modesty and goodness of Mary Levinge, sprung from another race, born in another sphere of life, she had always believed, and still must do so. That Mary, with her high ideals, her slightly fantastic notions of purity, should have stooped to an intrigue, Lady St. Cyprien felt to be absolutely out of all question. That the girl had been trapped seemed equally absurd, for what man could be so brute-low as to bring such shame upon so sweet a saint? Involuntarily as Lady St. Cyprien realised the extent and consequences of so cruel an outrage, she clenched her white fingers till the blood started from her palms.

It was the clinging touch of Mary's small hands that first roused her from her agony of rage and grief.

"Dearest, best of friends. You must not grieve."

"But the cruelty of it all. Oh! my poor child, when I think of all that is yet to come," and Lady St. Cyprien, growing incoherent in her anger and sorrow, lost the last remnant of calm frigidity and wrung her hands.

"When—when did you realise this thing?" she said presently when she could find words.

"About two hours ago. At first—at first I thought I should have died—with joy."

Heedless of the horror and alarm which grew in Lady St. Cyprien's dark eyes, Mary went on speaking.

"For I knew the sign had been vouchsafed to me; that all fears and doubts were dispelled for ever; that a nation's supplications were to be answered in God's good time."

She spoke very gently, the words dropping so slowly from her parting lips that she might have been in dreamland.

Lady St. Cyprien's voice was husky and rough, and she had to clear her throat twice before she could whisper:

"What do you mean, Mary?"

The girl rose to her feet. Her form dilated, her face glowed as from an inner fire, her eyes grew mystic as though they had gazed into the very heart of heaven itself.

"I mean that the God of my forefathers has been good and merciful; that he has hearkened to the prayers of my outcast people; that he has vouchsafed the desire of a despised race, and that henceforth the love of man is not for me. For I am that woman of whom the prophet Isaiah has spoken."

She raised her round white arms to heaven, and as her loose, full sleeves fell back, they gleamed like carven ivory in the sunshine.

"I am that maiden who is to be the human link between God and man. The miracle of miracles has come to pass. A virgin has conceived, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name, Immanuel."

With wonder and pity filling her heart, Lady St. Cyprien left Holmhurst. It was no use to argue.

That a marriage with her nephew, Stansdale, was out of the question she was convinced; but how far Mary's wild words were the chimera of a brain disordered by the terrible discovery of the morning, she dared not think. Only of one thing was she convinced, on one certainty she would stake her very life, Mary herself had not sinned. Of nothing else was she sure. The whole foundation of her faith in virtue and in truth was shaken, though it still stood.

Absorbed in doubts of past actions, and filled with fears for the future, Lady St. Cyprien was driven through the close July-parched streets and into the dusty Park. Her newest trouble was poor Stansdale. He was to lunch that day in Lowndes Square, to meet his betrothed; and in the

chintz-hung boudoir they would have talked of the wedding and the honeymoon, the gowns and the jewels, which are the glory of matrimony to a young girl. Now that was all over, and Lady St. Cyprien sighed very heavily as she thought of the blow she had to aim at the heart of the boy whom she loved as she would have loved a son, had God sent her one.

"Hallo! Adela. What are you dreaming about? The cut of Mary's wedding gown, or which house in your neighbourhood you intend the young couple to occupy?"

Lady Theo's loud voice rang out from the driver's seat of a smart mail phaeton, which she had pulled up in an alarming, if daring fashion, right across the noses of Lady St. Cyprien's horses.

"A thousand congratulations, dear," screamed Lady Theo, hauling at the mouths of the chestnut cobs she was driving, and making them dance, till every link and buckle in their harness jingled a silver chorus. "I had meant to turn in at Lady Holgate's last night, and then I suppose, I should have heard the news. Only I got stuck up at Kitty Vyvyan's card-table, and I won a bit; so of course I couldn't break my luck. But I saw it in the *Post* this morning. It's a perfect match."

And having screamed in an ascending key till she had reached the limits of even her flexible voice, Lady Theo subsided, and waited for an answer. It rather astonished her when it came.

"Let your man take the cobs home, Theo, and come for a walk with me. There's plenty of time before luncheon. It's not one o'clock yet."

Lady St. Cyprien had kept her sunshade so low over her head that, beyond catching a rather weary note in her always subdued voice, Lady Theo did not guess that anything was amiss.

But when the two ladies had wandered a little way up one of the narrower walks, where the burnt trees flung heavy shadows on the cracked, brown earth, Lady St. Cyprien lowered her parasol and dropped heavily on to a seat.

"Heavens! Adela," cried Lady Theo, with genuine concern. "Are you not well? There! and my flask is in the phaeton. I get so faint myself sometimes, I generally like to keep a *chasse* handy."

Lady Theo bounded forward, as though she would have pursued her carriage, but Lady St. Cyprien held out a detaining hand.

"Don't go, Theo," she cried, weakly. "I am not ill, but in great grief. A terrible thing has happened."

"I am so sorry, Adela. What is it? Any one ill? St. Cyprien, or Stansdale, or Mary? But they were with you last night at Holgate House; it can't be either——"

"It is Mary."

"Mary ill! How very sad!"

But Lady Theo's rather conventional platitudes of sympathy were stayed on her lips by the expression of intense sorrow on the older woman's face.

"She—Mary is not dead?" she asked in a low voice.

"It is worse than that. It is the worst thing that can come to a girl."

"Mary like that? Oh! Adela, impossible. You must be mad to even suggest such a thing."

Lady Theo's views of life, which, like those of most people, were principally governed by personal experiences, were scarcely of a charitable order. Her pert nose was a very bloodhound's for scenting out a scandal, and her wide mouth and shrill voice made the most of every good story that came her way. But the finer depths of her being, which she had done her best to stultify, had always re-

sponded to Mary's purer, higher views. She admired traits in the girl's character which she would have crushed beneath a scornful heel in her own, while the strong strain of ignorant superstition in her nature had always been touched by the mystic atmosphere of idealism with which Mary sometimes surrounded herself.

That this pure girl could have fallen as other women of all classes had fallen, she believed was impossible, and her disclaimer to Adela St. Cyprien was at once hurt and indignant.

"I do not say the child has sinned; God forbid that I or any one should cast so heavy a stone at her. Yet it is as I have told you. The marriage cannot take place."

The Countess's stately form, which none of her great circle had ever known to bend, now bowed and swayed in her excess of grief.

Lady Theo only sat with her big, beautiful eyes fixed on the sun-baked ground, and her ugly mouth twisted into an inscrutable curve.

"Adela! Adela! Does Mary account for—explain—excuse———?"

"I fear the terrible shock of discovery and confession has for the time absolutely destroyed her nerves. She made no scene; in fact, her quietude and self-assurance, after the first breakdown, were inexpressibly painful."

"She did not admit anything?" said Lady Theo, with eyes still fixed and mouth still contracted.

"Nothing! She was too full, poor child, of those dreams and notions which she has fostered till they have grown to be a part of her."

"Those ideas about—about the Virgin Mary, the picture, and all that?"

Adela St. Cyprien nodded.

The colour crept slowly from Lady Theo's cheeks, leav-

ing her sallow and plain: her mouth twitched nervously, and her voice shook so that she could scarcely speak.

"Adela—Adela," she hissed out between her labouring breaths. "Do you remember what Mary told us that Sunday morning in March? About a vision which she had."

"I remember that. But, Theo, surely you—don't think —you cannot connect——"

Lady Theo caught her friend's hand.

"I think, Adela, that a great miracle is going to happen. Perhaps the end of the world. Doesn't the Bible say something about it happening when the second Redeemer comes? Ah! Adela, you've been a good woman—and Mary is a saint, and worthy to be what she is. But I—I've been bad. I've told lies, and betted, and snubbed poor Tom shamefully—and I play cards—and once—once—it's three years ago now—I cheated awfully. I've been a very wicked woman, and now the time of punishment is coming."

Her eyes were dilated with terror, as though the eternal fires themselves were bursting forth at her feet. She shook like a leaf from head to foot.

"Theo, don't say such dreadful things," cried Lady St. Cyprien, roused to the necessity of action by the other's condition, which was fast becoming hysterical. "You must come home at once with me. The matter must be faced bravely and quietly—for Mary's sake. It will be all over the town in a few days, and God help her then, if some of the friends of her childhood do not stand by her."

The Row was empty as they crossed to Albert Gate, but Lady Belinda Harvey, who drove past them at the corner by the French Embassy, on her way to a big luncheon at the Bachelors' Club, told fifty people that afternoon that Lady St. Cyprien did not look a bit pleased at her nephew's engagement.

AN INTERMEZZO

Lambs wandering through the bushes leave white wool upon the thorns. The seagull drops white feathers on the darkest furrows. The snowflakes fall in white sheets over the Holy Season. The break of hawthorn buds blanch the trees: the snowdrops spangle the woods; the cherry and pear blossoms crown the gardens when the month of maidens is at hand. Even as these, the immaculate soul of Mary, ignorant of all but its own purity, made all things white about her in the house in which she lived, and weaved and wrought, like an angel in the moonlight, placing lilies and wax candles in a chapel of alabaster. An atmosphere clear as moonlight on sea-foam, white as lilies laid against marble, grew about the life of Mary, and filled every corner of her heart and home. It was as the halo of her virginity, which widened and spread in trembling silver rays that reached to the edges of her own domain, and made for her a very world of whiteness.

The velvet hangings, wrought with huge flowers in coloured silks and touched with metal threads, were folded aside. Oriental rugs of gaudy hues, and the tawny tiger skins were, with the golden bowls and flagons of *repoussé* work, put out of sight. As the days went by her fancy strengthened, till the flare of a colour jarred on her supersensitive nature, and the sound of a rough voice or heavy step thrilled her as the blare of brass among the melody of strings and wood instruments.

As the impress of her own purity grew about her,

obedient to her impression, Mary surrounded herself only with women servants, who, like herself, were dressed in white, and, as the ideality of her personality strengthened about them day by day, her house became more and more like a beautiful nunnery, where the footfalls were always light and soft, and the voices sounded low and sweet. It became like a quiet, retired place, where the reek of sordid sin and common clay never drifted across the threshold.

When the pale spirit of a new-born day descended upon the house, it drifted like a pale ghost into the great white hall, where a marble nymph, with a pulseless bosom of driven snow, lay in perpetual slumber. Dimly the staircase, all of colourless stone, and balustraded with slender columns of silver, rose in white steps up into the shadows of the upper floors. In every chamber of the house a white avalanche of snowy muslin curtains fell in transparent folds before the windows.

Mary woke amid the pearly shadows of lace hangings, the embroidered lilies on which were worked in thick white silk. They swung in scentless wreaths above the white face the innocent, meek eyes, and pale gold head, which lay so motionless among the bleached down pillows and foamy laces of the bed.

The young girl rose at dawn to pray, and walked with arched, bare feet, which passed like wind-blown petals of a white rose over the warm fleeces of the sheepskin rugs. With unbound hair, and her lawn nightdress falling about her in straight pleats, she knelt in the rays of the rising sun before the picture of the Virgin, so strangely like herself.

She kneeled on the steps of white marble, carved at the corners with the heads of cherubim, and railed within slight pillars of clear agate, through which the sun shot shafts of opalescent light. Silver-edged was the altar and three

great carved turquoises of virginal blue were set below the flounce of lace that decked the narrow cloth of shining silver. The sconces which held the ever-burning candles of pure wax sparkled like cut ice. All the room was pale and colourless as Chastity herself, save where the giant palms flung verdant shadows above the sheaves of Eucharist and Mary lilies, and the tiny bells of the valley blossoms, which filled the atmosphere with a white mist of perfume.

Voicelessly and in no set form she prayed; then, rising to her feet with the sweet humility of a handmaiden, she went to her toilette. The walls of her bath-room were tiled with ware of so fine a glaze that they glittered like mother-of-pearl shells and dulled the silver fittings, from whence rose, like burning incense, perfumed steam, which warmed the cooler air, and clung in glittering dew-drops to the sun-lit window-panes.

From her satin shoulders she slipped her simple gown, and gave up all the whiteness of her fair body to the embraces of the milky bath, splashing the water over herself like a silver statue in a fountain, while the reflected sun rays danced like golden fairies upon the polished walls.

Her bath finished, she hid the more perfect whiteness of her skin with clean lavender-perfumed linen, on which the little tucks and tiny hems, the pearl, the feather, and the coral stitches had all been set by the toil-worn fingers of nuns, who prayed as they worked in the garden of a convent. She brushed her fair hair long and arduously, waving the marvellous whiteness of her slender arms, until it hung like a great fleece of virgin gold about her shoulders. She sat before her dressing table, strewn with clear-cut crystal bottles, boxes, and toilet toys of carved ivory. Twisting her hair loosely about her head, she bound it with a fillet of white riband, in such a fashion that it was as

though a nebulous aureole had been spun out of the sun's gold threads above the strange fairness of her pale face.

A simple dress of white woollen, ungirdled at the waist, like those she had worn when a school-girl, made her look tall and slight as a swaying lily.

Still fasting, she prayed again for a few moments, then rose and went to her humble first meal of milk and white bread. Napery of old Flemish work, drawn and stitched into severely stiff designs, and bleached in the dyked grass-lands of quaint Holland, set the table. In the centre was placed a silver bowl, brimming with scented plumes of white lilac. At the four corners, in trumpet-shaped glasses of the clearest crystal, were branches of white roses. They almost met above her head as she took her place. The ware was white, soft as velvet to the touch, feather light, graceful in form, but guileless of all ornament, and simple as that which serves a peasant's table.

Thence went she to her business about the house, which hourly grew in whiteness, as though she were some spirit whose passage blanched all things with its wings.

Once, as she crossed the hall, herself so pale she scarcely had a being among the hewn marbles and white hangings, the crimson stain of scattered rose-leaves on the stairs caught her eyes. She started as though she had seen blood, and the shadow of a vague horror clouded her face. And yet she spoke very gently, as was her way, to the woman who had brought the coloured blossoms across her threshold.

She spent much time among her linen chests, which exhaled the fresh odour of newly dried lavender, and satiated her craving for immaculate purity. Her fevered fingers passed with lingering touch among the exquisite cool cloths of double damask, her long arms dived among the table linen from Germany, of fine bleached linen, cut away to admit of *entre-deux* of exquisite old lace, or rare

strips of embroidery. She turned over the Flemish drawn-work and the dainty embroideries on the cloths that came from Paris, but some fripperies for the tea-table, all frills and gaily coloured bows and strips of bright satin, she ordered to be taken away.

When she had strength she moved from shelf to shelf the mighty masses of sheets, all of finest Irish linen and bordered with hem-stitching, and often edged with lace, and she loved to lay her burning cheeks against the princely goffered, frilled pillow-cases, and the muslin embroidered bolster slips she laid on either side.

Of flounced and embroidered bedspreads, quilts, pillow shams, toilet covers edged with heavy guipure, and unwieldy piles of creamy white blankets, soft and warm to the touch as the backs of young lambs, she had endless stores.

One corner was set sacredly apart, and in it, among some fresh-gathered lavender and a few sweet leaves of lemon verbena a pile of little things grew day by day: sheets and blankets of such fairy lightness, lawn like a cobweb, lace like a film. She scarcely dared to touch them, they were so fine and small, and sometimes as she stood before them her eyes filled with happy tears. Then with brain that ached from the blinding whiteness of the linen, and nostrils satiated with the odour of new-mown hay and green hedges, among which it had been bleached, her soul sickened for more whiteness, for further evidence of purity, for multiplied proofs of innocence, and she wandered out into her garden, where all that was stainless of colour in Nature had been gathered.

From her favourite seat she could see and scent the flowers she loved the best. The lilies grew in ranks and swayed in the breeze like the heads of snowy-hooded nuns against the dim grey-green of the clipped yew hedge, above

which a guelder rose tossed its balls of snow in the light summer air. Down by the little pond some white irises, graceful as curving swan's necks, heralded the blooming of the water-lilies. Two may-trees, like young maidens in their first-communion dresses, lavished their sweetest perfume, which was crossed by the acrid odour of the wide-eyed marguerites, growing in low tazza-shaped vases along the south terrace of the house. The syringa bushes were sickly and cloying, with a myriad white buds. The flower-beds were virginal with white geraniums, anemones, and verbenas. The hedge of homely sweet-peas which hid the kitchen garden was sprinkled as though with snow, and an arch, close to the shelter of the drawing-room windows, which was overgrown with jasmine and myrtle, was like a strip of heaven itself, so thick were the starry blossoms.

A pair of white hydrangeas, laden with heavy-headed blooms, guarded a walk where simple cottage flowers, hollyhocks and foxgloves, flox and tall spear-heads of gladioli, grew in one drift of snowy beauty. There, too, were tiny white pansies, lifting their dainty cat-faces to the sun. Of roses there were many, yet all were pure of colour, and when they died, white dahlias, pale moon-flowers, and the delicate Michaelmas daisy blew in their place.

In the hothouses hung great bunches of waxen stephanotis, mocking with their exquisite perfume the camellias, expressionless and scentless as though carved from frozen snow. The azaleas, dazzling in their whiteness and delicacy, as a girl at her first ball, yet were foiled by the fairness of a glossy-leaved gardenia, covered with a hundred scented blooms. A white heliotrope put forth frail, sweet clusters against the wall, and feathery spireas waved their clustering cones, while over all, like a huge cup of ivory, hung a glorious magnolia, pouring from its inexhaustible bowl a mighty flood of matchless fragrance.

Among her flowers, whiter than them all, as fair and as innocent and pure as any, Mary walked or sat, clasping in her hands, and sometimes reading one of the few books she chose to have about her. They were very simple works, for the most part old, and telling in quaint language of brave deeds done in silence; of sorrows borne with fortitude; and of the lives of those who had been good men and women through all the ages of all the world. They were mostly bound in white velvet, and clasped with old silver. But among them all she liked best the little Old Testament in crabbed Hebrew characters and a shabby leather binding, which had belonged to the mother she had never known. When she used it, the worn leaves always fell apart at the prophecies of Isaiah. A rare casket of carved white jade held the worn volume of the poor Jewish woman, when Mary had it not between her hands.

But sometimes, when she was among the white flowers, touching their dainty faces with her slender fingers, and accepting to the full their sweet incense, the spirit of a vague unrest moved her, and urged her feet across the paddock, where in those days only white cows grazed, towards the little dairy, standing in the friendly shadow of an evergreen oak.

About the porched doorway a white clematis had wreathed its lithe limbs, and hung out a great banner of silver stars. Round the deepest windows climbed a pale passion-flower, with only the shadow of the cross to mar the snow of its rounded petals. Within the small building all was neat and clean and radiantly white, untouched by colour, save when the reflection of the blue skies filtered through the oak branches. A tiled dado lined the walls breast-high, whence rose squares of half-transparent onyx as far as the open ceiling, which was of white wood beams, and supported a lantern roof of clear glass. Small tiles of a pale

cream hue, and set in a herring-bone pattern, formed the stainless floor, across which, in a trough of white marble, ran a stream of water, that fell with a sound of tinkling bells from a group of young loves and swans of fine Parian china.

Around the walls, on low tables of white wood, stood the pans, white as the rich milk that filled them. The cream, tinged a slight yellow, stood apart in graceful bowls with double handles. The churn and skimmers, with the pails, glistened like burnished silver from an alcove, the wooden butter moulds and pats, scoured white as wool, made a pleasant display on an adjacent shelf.

Behind the glass doors of a quaint cupboard, inlaid with leaves and flowers of mother-o'-pearl, stood some cups and dishes of rare old Leeds ware, glazed a deep cream colour. She loved to dip a cup in a brimming pan, and watch with childish pleasure the milky drops slide down the smooth sides of the drinking-vessel, as she raised it to her lips.

A white goat she had bought and taught to follow her about, accompanied her to the dairy, and sniffed with its innocent nose at pans and pails alike.

As the days drew in, and the soft summer mists, like tufted wool, floated across the open spaces of her world, she left the gardens, where the flowers lay in argent glory under the white radiance of a broad moon, and spent the evening hours in the snowy nest she had made for herself. The electric lights and tall candles shone starlike among the clouds of muslin and of lace, and cast light rays on her own pale beauty.

At night, before she prayed, she bathed again, lest any stain of earth should mar the fairness of that body with which she thanked her God.

Even as "an angel-watered lily that near God grows and is quiet," holding herself in absolute hope and trust and

perfect faith for the future, Mary spent her days from the beginning even unto the end, and the white moon which shone in at her window, and the sparkle of the silver fountain which babbled in the still blueness of the night, were not more innocent of a fleck upon their purity than was the little white girl who lay in the big white bed, and dreamed of the child who was to know no man for a father.

CHAPTER XX

For a week Mary did not leave her house. But, the first waves of womanly fear and religious emotion past, the mantle of ineffable confidence and happy peace enwrapped her.

Her secret was as yet unknown, save, perhaps, in the seething workshops and tawdry parlours of the great East End Ghetto, where there hummed awestruck mutterings of a mighty miracle, and veiled hints of a prophecy to be fulfilled—even in the lifetime of those who spoke.

But even such mysterious whispers died into speedy oblivion. The vague pronouncements of Mrs. Marx, mumbled incoherently between large mouthfuls of sweet pickles, were scarcely worthy of even the passing notice of her sweated and starved compatriots.

For Mrs. Marx knew, or at least retained in her mind, what nebulous assumptions she had gleaned during a short visit her niece had paid her in her own apartments. The conversation on the occasion fell entirely to Mary, who, in very few and simple words, told her aunt that she was the chosen instrument for a marvellous manifestation.

Mrs. Marx, who was eating huge pieces of "Turkish delight" from a paper bag, cramming the rose-scented, sticky dainty into her mouth with fat-beringed fingers, and covering her coarse lips and double chin with powdered sugar, heard Mary's news without one quiver of emotion.

No womanly anxiety for the girl's physical well-being,

no sympathy with the awful ordeal which lay before her, not even vulgar curiosity or unreasoning anger pulsed in the old Jewess's selfish heart, or spoke from her honey-filled chewing mouth.

Mary, who had struggled long before she could bring herself to fulfil the Judaic law of honour and duty to those of her own family, and who had instinctively fought against betraying her sacred secret to the last woman in the world whom she could ever hold in love and reverence, was stung to the quick by Mrs. Marx's callous indifference. Was it thus that the race which was to be redeemed through her child would receive the manifestation of God's clemency and forgiveness? Would the prospect of being once more a nation among nations, honoured, reputed, and feared, be thus thrust aside without one prayer of gratitude or one song of praise?

For the moment, Mrs. Marx, with her brutish ignorance, her coarse instincts, her sensual indulgences, her narrow, self-centred ambitions, seemed to Mary the type of her people, and at the thought the girl's meek spirit rebelled and a great cry rose up in her heart that there might be no future.

"They are not worthy!" her wounded spirit wailed.

But when she was back in her own boudoir, where the sweet summer airs fluttered all day long under the striped awnings and sighed amid the big bowls of fresh roses, and where the sunlight, filtering through chestnuts and elms, cast a tender veil of golden green on the quaint commodes and cabinets, the shining silver, and rare china, and lent a new mysterious charm to the dove-eyed Madonna, who, with joined fingers and sweet childish mouth, smiled above a big vase filled with white lilies, resignation came to her.

Here, amid the surroundings she loved, and before the picture she reverenced, courage and hope strengthened and

grew in her sad heart, and her faith in her God, in her future, and in herself, flowed back into its old channels.

During that week of introspection and self-communion, Lady St. Cyprien came to see Mary each day.

Of Stansdale's genuine grief and manly sorrow at his broken engagement, Lady St. Cyprien said little. Her love and her discretion warned her that to harp on the inevitable would be both ineffectual and cruel. She was a woman who had never indulged in idle tears.

"His regret is profound, for he loves you very dearly. But his faith in you, like mine, is unalterable, and will endure till the end," Lady St. Cyprien had said, and then the engagement was as though it had never been.

At the end of the week, when Lady St. Cyprien arrived as usual at Holmhurst, she was told that, the day being fine, Miss Levinge and Mrs. Marx had started for a long drive into the country, and were not expected back till late.

That same evening Mr. Erastus Bawdon had a "little music" at his flat in Victoria Street. His entertainments were sufficiently out of the way to attract even the most *blasé* of his circle.

"You see, one never knows what Erastus is going to let one in for. He gives regular 'surprise' parties," had shrilled Lady Theo across the railings in the Park that afternoon. "One night he had cards and grilled bones till breakfast time. Another it was a reformed drunkard, who gave us a lecture on D. T.; lemonade was served and lights were out at eleven. He made up for it by a very tidy prize fight the following week. I never miss a party at Bawdon's."

So about midnight the thirty guests whom Mr. Bawdon had favoured with invitations were assembled in his drawing-room, which was gorgeously decorated in sufficiently divergent styles as to remind a new-comer of a pagan

temple in the East and a side chapel in a Catholic church. The *décors* of his flat varied with his religions, and at present the suggestion of a chapel was in the ascendant.

The "little music"—which had been supplied by a dubiously clean band of howling drum-beating Orientals, and a fat Circassian woman, who had danced the dance of suggestion rather than intention—was over. The performers were removed by Mr. Bawdon's Hindoo servant, and the guests, who had been seated, rose and wandered rather aimlessly about. The night was intensely hot and languid, and the dreary monotony of the Eastern music and the lazy movements of the fat dancer had depressed everybody.

In the first movement at least a dozen guests slipped away, the men to their clubs, the women to the comparative coolness of their lawn nightdresses and darkened bedrooms. Those who remained obviously wondered why they did so.

But Mr. Bawdon was a man of resource. It was his last party of the season, and he did not intend it to be an entire failure.

"A score of us left, and all good for a flutter," he said in his massive tones. "Just enough for a little game."

He pulled back an arras, made from a wonderfully wrought carpet which he had acquired in India during his profession of Buddhism. A charming card-room, perfectly arranged and outrageously Philistine in decoration and colour, lay beyond. It was a relic of his Agnostic days, which even in his most fervent throes of emotional religion he had lacked the strength of mind to obliterate, though he had been known to effect a compromise by shutting it up.

His guests moved toward the card-room. It looked cool and pleasantly commonplace after the heavily scented, overelaborate, tiresome complexity of the drawing-room, and on

a buffet, laid amid clear crystals of ice, were gold-tipped bottles flanked by glittering cut glasses and many dishes of tempting sandwiches.

Lady Theo was first across the room, her face, which had looked very worn and haggard all the evening, perceptibly brightening at the prospect of a gamble. Suddenly she stopped, and, facing round, cried to those who were following her, "No! No! We mustn't go in there. We mustn't play cards—above all, for money."

"What's the joke, dear lady? Pray explain," drawled Bertie Chant, who, very flaccid and weary after the hard work of the season, strolled past her and dropped into a chair by the card-table.

"Bertie, come away!" cried Lady Theo, working herself up, as women will, for a scene. "Mr. Bawdon, I beg of you to shut your card-room. At such a moment—to gamble and bet—when the time is already too short—only a few more months of preparation——"

"Bravo! Bravo!" applauded Bertie Chant, patting his hands softly together as he returned to the drawing-room, and whispered in Dr. Noel Marrable's ear that this was another of Bawdon's surprises.

"Preparation! what in heaven's name have we got to prepare for?" asked Dr. Marrable, thinking to give Lady Theo a friendly hand in a got-up scene.

"For the regeneration, or for the annihilation of the world. It may be a few weeks only before we are called to our last account."

"What a quite too awful idea, Lady Theo," tittered a pretty woman with an outrageously *decolleté* gown and obviously dyed hair.

"Oh! shocking! But who on earth is going to do such a very uncomfortable thing?" babbled Bertie Chant in his most insipid tones.

"He who is to come!" cried Lady Theo, her face very white and her eyes very brilliant. "The second Manifestation of the divine mercy is at hand——"

"For God's sake stop her, Aunt Adela," whispered Lord Stansdale, slipping round the little crowd to Lady St. Cyprien's side. "She'll throw Mary's name to these gaping fools in another moment, and then——"

"A Redeemer is coming among us for a second time. How shall we who have wasted our lives in selfish pleasures and the gratification of the flesh, live in his sacred presence?" went on Lady Theo in her loud, clear voice.

Mr. Erastus Bawdon's large face grew ominously grave. Lady Theo was curiously vulgar, piquantly plain, she was a privileged person in high circles, and he himself had had, in other and more material days, a considerable weakness for her. But his cultured sense had always revolted at anything that savoured of blasphemy, as being devoid of proportion and lacking in beauty, and at the present moment he felt fearful as to how far Lady Theo's rather deficient sense of art might carry her.

"Dear Lady Theo," he began sonorously. "A joke is always charming, but surely on such a subject——"

"Oh! don't stop her," cried she of the bust and shoulders. "She's quite too funny."

"So fresh!" sighed Bertie. "Quite original! Lady Theo as a preacher would draw all London. Where's it to be? Have you engaged the Abbey or St. Paul's?"

"I cannot preach to you," cried Lady Theo, with desperation. "I am not worthy. I am only fitted to warn you. He who will tell you the truth, who will show you the way to salvation, is to come, and is at hand."

"Theo! Theo, dear, don't you see they're laughing at you?" whispered Lady St. Cyprien, who, with a frightened look on her stately face, had come close to the other's side.

"They think you are in fun. Let us go away. I will take you home."

"Oh! dear Lady St. Cyprien, don't interrupt. I believe Lady Theo has joined the Salvation Army," giggled Bertie Chant flippantly.

"Ah! you may all laugh now," cried Lady Theo with emotional defiance. "But wait till you hear that the prophecy—surely you read your Bibles once—is fulfilled. Wait till the news goes that a holy child is born of a holy virgin."

A burst of noisy laughter rang through the room. Dr. Marrable, who had been leaning against the carved mantel, suddenly stiffened himself and listened intently to the ebb and flow of words.

Only Lady St. Cyprien and Lord Stansdale were silent, while Erastus Bawdon scowled heavily.

"Oh! you may laugh, you may sneer," said Lady Theo, tossing her head. "You think the age of miracles is past. But I know that there is yet one to come. I know that there is one who is a saint, an angel on earth; one who alone is fitted to be the instrument of this wicked world's salvation."

"Name! Name! Name!" shouted half a dozen laughing voices.

Stansdale caught his breath hard and waited for the blow he was powerless to avert.

Lady St. Cyprien's right hand flashed whitely towards Lady Theo's parted lips, but she was too late.

"Mary Levinge!"

The two words dropped, but were caught and echoed in twenty different tones.

Stansdale turned deadly white, and Marrable, standing apart in the shadows, staggered as though he had been struck.

Was the vague suspicion that he had silenced a hundred times lately in his own mind a fact? Was the shadow going to take substance and crush his own heart and her fair name in one hideous ruin? At Lady Theo's words memory opened as a book, and he recalled how during the past few months every look, every act, every symptom had pointed accusing fingers of doubt and suspicion at the one woman in the world for whom he had ever had profound faith and reverence, and for whom he had ever felt the pulses of love. The experience of the doctor was wide, but the affection and belief that filled the man's heart fought hard with his brain. His common-sense said, "It is!" His soul cried, "It cannot be!" Every one, he told himself, had made mistakes. Good women had been slandered before now, and only death had proved their innocence.

And now the name of the girl in whose sinlessness he believed, on whose innocence he would have staked his soul's salvation, was to be made a bye-word, and he—he dared not defend her.

"Mary Levinge! Impossible!" exclaimed Bawdon, loudly. "Why, she is coming here to-night. I had a note from her only this morning, saying that she was going to pass the day in the country, and should be late."

"Oh! she'll never dare come!" cried the *decolleté* dame, with outraged virtue glowing from every inch of her bare skin.

"What shall we do if she does?"

"I shall see how things go."

"I think I shall leave at once," murmured the other fluttering femininities. The hubbub was at its height. Society, with a new victim flung on its mercy, cast away its veneer, and whetted its fangs and sharpened its claws, preparatory to the rending and devouring of the fair reputation of a young and beautiful woman.

With shrill voices and cruel eyes they fought and wrangled over the possibilities and probabilities. The women's shoulders shrugged right out of their gowns, the men's eyes grew warm and their lips moist and loose, as they hazarded a hundred guesses, or affirmed a score of facts.

Only Lady St. Cyprien stood sternly apart, her handsome face set in the effort to keep back her tears, and Stansdale, sunk in a chair, covered his face with his hands.

"Miss Levinge."

The soft voice of the Indian servant was heard above the babel, and carried a dead silence through the room.

Mary entered, her tall, slender form gowned in soft white silk, which fell in ungirdled folds straight to her feet from a wide throatlet of worked silver and great turquoises. Her gold hair was drawn simply from her forehead, on which played a light mesh of soft, loose curls. She was not paler than usual, but her expression was intensified in its sweetness, and her eyes set in her slightly sharpened face, seemed larger and of greater depth. For an appreciable space of time no one spoke, and she stood in the amber shaded light, a fair picture of sainthood outlined against the dim tapestries, which told in uncouth colourings and faded outlines some mythical adventure of the old Greek gods.

It was Lady St. Cyprien who broke the spell which mock morality and false virtue were casting over Mr. Bawdon's guests.

She swept past the suspicious women and doubting men, and with outstretched hands of welcome, cried:

"My dear, how late you are; but we are all so pleased to see you."

Then she kissed her on the brow, and, flinging one arm round the girl, she led her through them all to a low seat.

With shy handshakes and awkward salutations they greeted Mary, but Lady Theo, with a quaint admixture of religious fervour and the deference she would pay to a royal personage, swept a low curtsey as she passed by.

Then Mr. Erastus Bawdon, conscious that the Rubicon was crossed, gave her a warm yet reverential greeting. Lord Stansdale, the one man she had dreaded meeting, spoke to her almost at once, and the strain of publicly addressing her once over, took a seat by her side.

Marrable was the very last to go near her. He was pale as ashes, and looked drawn and old in the bright light. He merely extended a cool, formal hand, after taking leave of Lady St. Cyprien.

"I doubt our meeting again before the autumn," he said to Lady St. Cyprien. "I start for Norway to-morrow."

"And we shall be settled in Scotland before you are back. Won't you spare a week to the grouse? I can offer plenty of them—and, perhaps, Miss Levinge as attractions. Otherwise, we shall be very quiet there this year."

He fixed his keen dark eyes on Mary's face for a moment, and paused before replying.

Was he waiting for a sign from her? If so, he was ungratified, for no shadow of interest in him or consciousness of his gaze touched her unclouded eyes or sweet, curved lips.

"I am fixed to Norway for as long as I can be away; but thanks very much, all the same. Good-night—and good-bye."

The curtains were dropped over the card-room, and till the rosy summer dawn paled the electric lights beneath their shades of amber silk to a sickly yellow, Mary sat amid the few who stayed.

Again her gentle voice told of her vision, and of the later revelation which had come to her. Her words were very

few, but the simplicity of truth spoke with her mouth, the light of fervent faith shone in her dreamy eyes.

Erastus Bawdon was delighted. A new cult had been started in his drawing-rooms; the first scenes of a fresh development of the world's history were acted there.

CHAPTER XXI

Business was over for the day. The ponderous iron shutters had slowly veiled from late passers-by the delicate china and gemlike pictures set forth behind the plate glass windows of Levinge's Art Gallery. The purple twilight lay thick and heavy in the front shop, where a couple of assistants, with liquid dark eyes and markedly Jewish faces, were quietly checking the rare contents of a large case which had come up from Christie's salesrooms an hour ago.

In the Gallery itself it was lighter, and Martin Baird could still see to mark a bulky catalogue. Presently the young clerks—sent to Levinge's to learn the business—announced their task as fulfilled, and took their leave. The boy in a green baize apron, who only appears in West End emporiums in the early morning or at closing time, let them out at the narrow wicket cut in the shutter and then came to his master.

"Papers, sir. Anything more, sir?"

"Only these letters for the post—and drop that into the box at Joshua's as you go down the street. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

The rattle of a closing door announced the boy's departure.

Baird wrote on in the fast fading light, working at his catalogues, noting instructions from customers, and jotting down prices till the last gleams faded, and he dropped the papers on his knees.

The pictures had lost all colour with the dying day, but the statuary loomed vaguely white; and a suit of armour, worked in delicate chased tracery that was fine as cobweb lace, shone with pale, reflected beams from a distant corner.

Baird sat very still, his bowed figure and lean grey head absorbed in the shadowy depths of the great chair of quaint Italian carving he occupied. He loved the Gallery, as a man with a lonely heart is forced to love the inanimate background whence his friends had faded. He would often spend long hours there, oblivious of the fair objects which hemmed him close on every side, remembering only that amidst the ever-changing surroundings he had been very happy. His squalid boyhood, his disappointed youth, faded to forgetfulness, and he only remembered the years he had spent in the Bond Street shop.

In fancy he saw old Ephraim Levinge, shabby and bent, with his big clever head surmounted by a skull-cap, passing to and fro among the relics of a score of countries, muttering his long prayers in the soft oily tongue of a dead nation. Again he saw the large coarse fingers handling with tenderest touch and practised surety the egg-shell wonders of a tiny cup or the fragile weft of some priceless tapestry. He remembered the look of cunning over a bargain, the calm determination in face of a heavy and risky outlay. He recalled the instinctive sympathy with the fad of the moment, and the almost prophetic foresight as to future fashionable fancies, which are such attributes of the Jewish people, and which enable them, and them alone, to build large fortunes from the dispersal of other men's homes.

Then the waking dream changed. Round the door peeped a child's flaxen head, and among the giant vases and tall carved cabinets a little white-robed figure walked sedately.

"Martin, tell me a story."

And a thousand legends of fancy and of fact thronged back on Baird. How she had questioned and wondered—and believed!

Instinctively he raised his eyes, and peered through the blue dusk to where the painted panel of the angel-faced Madonna had hung for so many years. One of Charles II.'s buxom beauties in all the conventional disarray of Lely's composition, with bold round eyes and bare round breasts, hung there now. A quaint fancy that the picture, with its tawdry affectation of simplicity, desecrated the past, fell upon him and he determined to have it moved elsewhere on the morrow.

"Sir! Are you there?" asked a woman's voice.

"Yes, Mrs. Wills. I am tired, and am resting in the dark."

"Your supper is ready, sir."

"Very well. Serve it. I shall be upstairs in five minutes."

The housekeeper's footsteps died away, and Baird, without rising, switched on the electric light, preparatory to putitng away his papers and seeing all was safe for the night. He blinked a moment in the strong glare, then his eyes, as they cleared, caught sight of the evening papers the boy had placed at his side before leaving. Idly he opened *The Piccadilly Gazette*, glancing at the clearly printed columns as he slowly paced across the Gallery.

Suddenly he stopped. The ascetic lines of his rugged face stiffened. He read and re-read a short paragraph, then let the journal flutter to his feet.

"Miss Mary! Oh, God!" he cried aloud. "It can't be true. The man who wrote such words is a liar and a coward, so to traduce a saint like that."

All the chivalry latent in his cold Scottish nature was

aroused, and a fierce unrest seized upon him to go out and thrash the unknown writer of lies.

But first of all, he must know the truth. He despised himself for the doubt that such a desire implied, but he could not bring her fair name into a brawl without seeing her. One glance at her pure face, one word of her sweet voice, would nerve him to his task of avenger.

It was ten o'clock before he rang the bell at Holmhurst, but the servants knew his position with regard to their mistress, and he was admitted and at once taken to her boudoir.

"Martin! how kind of you to come," was her greeting. "But—surely you've brought no bad news—there is nothing wrong, I hope."

"Nothing is wrong, Miss Levinge—except—this shameful thing——"

He had not touched her proffered hand, for he had doubted, and was not worthy. But he held out towards her the newspaper, and pointed to the paragraph.

She took it from him, glanced over the lines, and then laid the paper quietly down.

"It is quite true," she said simply.

Martin reeled as though he had been struck.

"True! True! That you are"—his lips refused to frame the accusing words.

"It is true that I am elect among all women, and that, in the fulness of time, the one for whom my people have looked and prayed through the centuries is to come."

Martin Baird looked at her, as she stood there, tall and fair, and pure as one of her own name flowers. Was she mad, or was it all true?

He knew vaguely the faith of the Jews—that a prophecy was yet to be verified—that a redeemer had yet to come. But that she, so tender, so young, should be set apart, seemed to him too fearful—too wonderful.

Yet as he looked at her, the consciousness of a marvellous change in her came to him. An expression of saintly beatitude irradiated from her face, she seemed hedged about with a more than earthly dignity, the glory of an overwhelming purity shone above her head.

And yet—and yet—there was that hateful print—and surely the age of miracles was past. Filled with fears for her well-being, racked with doubts for her happiness, the faithful servant stood before the girl, who was at once his mistress and his greatest charge.

"Miss Mary! Miss Mary!" he cried, holding out hands which grief had enfeebled and made trembling. "Can nothing be done?"

"There is nothing to do but to wait the Lord's good time."

"But people—the world—*your* world. Ah! my dear, my dear, how they will scoff at you."

She drew herself up and answered fervently:

"Let them. God knows that I am pure."

Martin Baird's hands dropped abashed, as though she had reproved him with a lack of faith. He stood before her, his face puckered in acute thought, his stern, thin mouth working with emotion.

When he spoke again his voice was thick and husky, and he did not look at her.

"Miss Mary, often before your grandfather died, he made me promise that I would give my life in your service. It was the one price he asked in payment for all that he had done for me. I swore—not once, but many times, that so long as I had breath I would stand between you and sorrow. Miss Mary, I've known you as a little child—I've watched you as a girl—I've prayed that I might see you a happy wife. All these years you've had no need of me, but now—now I may be of some use to you."

He drew nearer to her, his whole body trembling with excess of pity—and of fear.

"Miss Mary—let me marry you."

"Martin! you are mad!" cried the girl starting back.

"No, I am not; only hear me out. Let me marry you, I beseech. No one need ever know, for I at least will keep silence. Only in case they make it too hard for you at any time—in case they are too cruel—then I will speak."

The girl's eyes filled with tears. The man's intense devotion—his love for her—holy and selfless as that of St. Joseph—touched her to deepest gratitude.

She laid both hands, so long and white and fast growing thin to transparency, upon his two shoulders.

"Faitfhul servant, dear friend. You move me to my very soul. But—I am in higher hands. My destiny is written. The world cannot harm me; the world cannot help me."

She spoke but little more, for one of her moods of silent ecstasy fell upon her. But Martin Baird understood. For, as broken-hearted he left her white presence, he knew that no man should ever call her wife.

CHAPTER XXII.

Mrs. Mossenthal always spent the hour between breakfast and her morning walk in her dining-room. The trees in the Square garden were already shedding their sunburnt, smoke-dried leaves, which lay in untidy heaps in the gutters and roadway.

Mrs. Mossenthal, whose colourless eyes and long nose peered above the flower-boxes on the window sill, frowned as a puff of summer air whirled a barrow full of dust and leaves across the freshly cleaned front doorsteps of her house and down the area.

It was a very hot morning, but Mrs. Mossenthal was characteristically gowned in a dark grey, tightly fitting tweed, with an abnormally high collar. Her ash-coloured hair looked more than ever as if it were painted against her sallow face, and with her nipped, flat waist and stiff shoulders, she had all the appearance of a Dutch doll. The dining-room, handsomely as it was furnished, was as uncompromisingly precise and wooden as herself.

No cheery litter of morning papers or correspondence met the eye. Mrs. Mossenthal's letters were destroyed as soon as answered, and the place for the *Ladies' Pictorial* was the lowest shelf of the dinner waggon, where it did not look "untidy."

Having scowled sufficiently at the flying leaves, she rang the dining-room bell sharply three times. A moment later her maid, who always waited outside the door in anticipation of the summons, entered.

"Put on my boots, Bates, at once, and tell me what I've got to do to-day."

Mrs. Mossenthal knew perfectly well what her day's engagements were, but she enjoyed the sensation of dominating the mind of another, even a servant, with her own petty desires and requirements. It gave her a sense of power, which, being of a tyrannical nature, she loved to exercise.

"Well, ma'am," began Bates, in a sing-song voice, as she laced a pair of well-made boots on her mistress's large feet. "You've got to give the orders and go to the manicures now, and at half-past twelve Madame Sophie expects you to try on your dresses. Mrs. Bellamy comes to lunch——"

"And mind I wear that pink crêpon. Now, don't forget. Mrs. Bellamy's not seen that yet," snapped Mrs. Mossenthal, with that petulant vigour she put into everything which concerned herself.

"Very well, ma'am. Then you've ordered the carriage at three, and there are nineteen sets of cards to be left in South Kensington. At five Mrs. Norton will be here to massage you, and at six Jules is coming to shampoo your hair and dress it."

"And mind you have plenty of hot towels this time. You know I have to be ready to go out at eight, and Mr. Mossenthal hates to be kept waiting. Now go and put my things out: the grey hat and gloves, and the veil I wore yesterday."

Mrs. Mossenthal's thin mouth widened in a smile as she once again went through to herself her engagements for the coming day. She thank God that no one could accuse her of indolence. *She* did not waste her time romping with a nursery full of children, or lazing over the papers; she did not interfere in drawing-room meetings or worry her friends

to subscribe to charities they cared nothing about; no one could quote an instance of her intruding on bitter grief or bothering in sick-rooms. No! she spent her time, her thoughts, and her money on herself.

"And," she said aloud, as she rose from her chair, "if every one else did the same, it would be a very good thing for the world in general."

A sharp ring at the door bell arrested her thoughts, and she hurried with her ungainly walk across the room.

"James!" she hissed in a loud whisper through the dining-room door, to the advancing footman. "James! I can't see anybody." I'm just going out, and I've got all the orders to give and my nails to be polished between now and twelve. I've no time to waste on callers."

The visitor seemed to be in as great a hurry as Mrs. Mossenthal, for before the footman, who was struggling into his jacket while his mistress addressed him, could reach the door, the bell rang again loudly.

"Be quick, James! and say 'Not at home.' "

Curious to ascertain who would so far trespass the rigid rules of Bayswater etiquette as to pay a call at ten in the morning, Mrs. Mossenthal laid her ear against the crack of the dining-room door, which she held ajar.

"Not at home! Are you quite sure?" said a voice with the well-known tribal twang running through it. "Mrs. Mossenthal does not go out before ten as a rule, does she?"

Recognising Mrs. Cohen's voice, and fearing that under a strict cross-examination James would break down, Mrs. Mossenthal deemed it best to advance with what cordiality she could into the hall, and invite her visitor in.

"Oh! I thought that boy of yours was not telling the truth," cried Mrs. Cohen, squeezing her vast bulk past the footman. "I was certain you would be in to me."

But Mrs. Mossenthal's greeting was scarcely cordial.

Her sour face did not even relax into a Society smile, and she did not offer Mrs. Cohen a seat, but with a cold handshake stood upright just within the door.

Mrs. Cohen was not to be deterred, however, by such trifles. She pushed into the dining-room, and sitting heavily in a chair, began to fan herself with a large green paper fan which was slung round her on a black ribbon.

"My dear!" she began, gasping heavily under her mountainous bust, which, unrestrained by the blouse of soiled light silk which she wore, assumed astonishing proportions. "What a fearful thing this is. My poor Eugene—what an escape."

Mrs. Mossenthal tightened her mouth till it looked like a straight gash in her yellow face, but otherwise evinced no emotion. The fact that Eugene Cohen had never shown the slightest interest in herself was quite sufficient to make her dislike the young man.

"Surely you have heard? Isn't your husband shocked?" went on Mrs. Cohen, now a little nettled at the coolness with which she and her prospective bombshell were being received, and rattling her green fan till it creaked.

"I've heard nothing, and 'Sac always takes the paper away with him," answered Mrs. Mossenthal, with an indifference which veiled admirably a growing curiosity as to why the Queen of Bayswater should have come round so early in the morning.

"If you wait to read it in the papers you'll never know about it," said Mrs. Cohen contemptuously. "Though I hear there was a hinting sort of paragraph without names in *The Piccadilly Gazette* a night or two ago. But the scandal is all over the town. It's—about—*Mary—Levinge!*"

Mrs. Cohen said the words slowly, and with an intention not devoid of malice, for she knew that the Mossenthals boasted among their own set of their kinship with the great

heiress, and she had never forgiven Mary for refusing to marry her son. Her dark eyes, alight with triumph, watched Mrs. Mossenthal grow green, which was her bloodless equivalent for flushing. She noted how she glanced into the hall and passage before closing the dining-room door, and coming slowly over to the table.

"About Mary Levinge! What's she been doing?"

Mrs. Cohen laid one fat hand in a stained glove on Mrs. Mossenthal's arm, and drawing her down, whispered something in her ear.

"How horrible! Ah! the wretched girl," cried Mrs. Mossenthal, all the savage fury of a woman who is enforcedly chaste by reason of her want of attraction, embittering her thin high voice. "That's what comes of being too fine to live decently among her own people. We were not good enough for her."

Mrs. Cohen nodded her handsome head sympathetically.

"I always said that after old Ephraim's death Mary Levinge's place was with you, her only relations—until she married."

She had never said anything of the kind, but it suited her now to avenge herself on the girl with the first instrument that came to hand.

Mrs. Mossenthal pulled a chair close to Mrs. Cohen and sat down.

"Tell me really what you have heard—what people are saying."

And the two women, with interjections of sham disgust and affected horror, talked and turned and twisted the tale which was ringing through the drawing-rooms of London. They snorted scornfully at the strange belief whispered by Mary's friends, and discussed with noisy indignation and smothered giggles every salacious suggestion and coarse innuendo.

"And you say the girl is still going about?" said Mrs. Mossenthal, sitting back in her chair at last.

"Indeed, yes. I hear the scene at that Mr. Erastus Bawdon's was disgraceful. One would think the girl had done something marvellous; they're making a regular cult of her."

Mrs. Cohen creaked the green fan again and sniffed aggressively, but Mrs. Mossenthal was silent. Mechanically her glassy eyes wandered to the clock; it was past eleven, and she had missed her appointment with the manicure at Whiteley's. For once that did not trouble her. With all her narrow ignorance and self-centred stupidity, Mrs. Mossenthal had the racial eye for a "good thing."

"They're making a regular cult of her!"

That meant that Lady St. Cyprien and her set, all of the great world, people who were above the jibes and jeers of the smaller fry, intended to stand by Mary. It might end in the lover—for, of course, there must be a lover, and one who was probably a very big "swell"—coming forward and marrying her. Perhaps it would be as well to "hedge" a little, though not of course to take open sides. 'Sac would never countenance that, for he had old-fashioned ideas about the virtue of the women of his people. But a little sympathetic kindness could do no harm, and if there was any social notoriety attaching to the business Mrs. Mossenthal saw no reason why she should not shine in the reflected light.

"Perhaps the poor girl can't help it," she said presently, in a reflective manner.

"Can't help what?"

"Going about and not keeping people out of Holmhurst. I should think she would be very glad to get away to some quiet, retired spot."

Mrs. Cohen stopped the noisy waving of her fan. She waited for what was to come.

"I think I shall advise 'Sac to lend her our little place in Essex for the autumn, or till it's all over, if she likes to stay on there. 'The Nest' is very quiet."

Mrs. Mossenthal did not look at Mrs. Cohen while she was speaking, and it was intuition more than ocular knowledge which warned her that the fierce light of suspicion was growing in that lady's fine eyes.

"We do not intend to go there this year ourselves. "Sac is ordered to Carlsbad, and then we shall spend the autumn in Italy."

The words were in due season, and Mrs. Cohen's rising wrath was somewhat appeased, though she could not resist saying:

"You must do as you please about that, of course. Mary is your relative, and I thank heaven heartily that I've nothing to do with her."

Then Mrs. Cohen felt better and began to devise a means by which she could herself see the girl.

"All the same, I thank that immediate steps should be taken to expostulate with Mary as to her conduct in still going about. It brings *us* into contempt with the Christian set."

Mrs. Mossenthal rode for a fall.

"It will be my duty to see her at once," she said.

"But she won't see you," cried Mrs. Cohen bluntly. "I'm told no one is admitted to Holmhurst without express orders—and, besides, my dear—you scarcely know her, do you?"

Mrs. Mossenthal's face hardened.

"She's dined here."

"Once!" interposed the other calmly. "And I don't remember that you ever dined with her at her house."

Mrs. Mossenthal waived the degree of intimacy, and asked who was to speak to Mary with regard to her conduct.

It was on the tip of Mrs. Cohen's tongue to claim the privilege, but a glance at her hostess's sullen face warned her to be careful.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll all speak to her." She snapped her fan twice in triumph. "I will write to Mary this very day, a kind letter of course, and just ask her to come to tea one afternoon. You can drop in—and——shall we say next Thursday?"

"And where shall this meeting be held?" asked Mrs. Mossenthal.

Mrs. Cohen rose, smoothed down the tumbled front pleats of her blouse, walked to the door and opened it before she answered.

"At my house, of course, four o'clock."

As Mrs. Mossenthal followed her through the hall she felt that she could yield that last point, for of course Mary would accept the offer of "The Nest," and perhaps that stuck-up Lady St. Cyprien would go there with her.

"Very well," she said, with a fair grace, as she drew back the latch of the front door. "Four on Thursday."

A railway van pulled up at the house, and a large hamper was handed down.

"Oh! there's the weekly hamper from 'The Nest.' I have no more time to chat, Mrs. Cohen; I must go downstairs and see the vegetables weighed. Servants are so dishonest."

CHAPTER XXIII

From a social standpoint Mrs. Isaac Mossenthal detested her own people. It was not to rub shoulders with her kind that she haunted Kempton and struggled for invitations to Hurlingham. Her flaunting Worth gowns and exaggerated Virot bonnets, expressly built for the English market and hopelessly un-Parisian, which she picked up as "marked down" models at sales in second-rate Regent Street show-rooms, seldom graced the tawdry drawing-rooms of Maida Vale and Kensington.

Rather did she prefer to play Mæcenas in petticoats in dingy studios at the back of Campden Hill, or in the more doubtful side-streets of Fulham. There, among unshorn daubers and unshaved mummers, half-a-dozen lady scribblers on "fashions" in smart bonnets and doubtful boots—a few young women who, on the plea of a desire for independence or irrepressible artistic yearnings, had left their parents' roofs and were living, no one knew how or where; amidst this idle crowd of conceited fribbles, who talked bad art and professed the cult of "Self"—Mrs. Mossenthal felt that she was in the "movement."

"I hate Jewesses; they can never talk of anything but babies and servants," she would say in high nasal tones. "Celebrities are quite different, they're so interesting."

And so she would garb herself in many-hued raiment and walk stiffly to her brougham and go off to listen to the latest scandal concerning Mrs. Larousse the pastellist and young Horton, who did those wonderful fog studies, and

how Maudie Taunton, the daughter of an old Indian officer, had dyed her hair orange and gone in for leg parts, and that Miss Templemore, the stuck-up girl with the white face, who sculpted, and who had boxed Tommie Biddulph's ears when he tried to kiss her at Lottie Vere's birthday supper, had gone into the country—Cumberland or Cornwall—for six months, and that old Lord Midas was going to pay expenses.

Nothing but the idea that for once a Jewish drawing-room could supply her with even a greater novelty in the way of "talk" than the Bohemian purlieus of St. John's Wood and Holland Park, fortified Mrs. Mossenthal in her intention of going to Mrs. Cohen's on the Thursday following that lady's awful revelations. Besides, she still entertained the idea of offering "The Nest" to Mary as an autumn domicile. Yet, for all that, she was torn another way too.

Mr. Lancelot Tremayne had just had a first piece produced at the St. George's Theatre, and was going to celebrate his accession to the ranks of the celebrities that very afternoon with a tea-party at his house in Bedford Park. Quite a number of actors and actresses would be there and all the lady reporters for the fashion papers, and the gathering would have been delightful. Now, alas! that new frock—seven and a half guineas at an Oxford Street sale—and that bonnet with the wings in front, the bows at the back, and the roses and tulips on the crown, would remain unrecorded among the toilettes of the year, for was not the Tremayne's tea the last party of the season?

Mrs. Mossenthal turned quite livid with annoyance at the thought, while she ate her lunch, cutting up her food into minute and precise scraps and slipping them sideways into her tight mouth in a manner peculiarly her own.

At four precisely she stepped across the threshold of

Mrs. Cohen's house in Westbourne Terrace. Gilt cornices, showy bead curtains, stuffy plush draperies, and gaudy pottery were dominant notes in the scheme of the decoration of both entrance and staircase.

The drawing-room had a golden ceiling, which, by reason of its heavy, lowering effect, gave the visitor a headache, and the walls were covered in silk of peacock-green and gold. At least three pairs of curtains were hung and draped and tied across each window. Some figures of black boys, swathed in stiff red and blue drapery, stood either side of the fireplace. Large vases of Oriental ware, and small tables laden with toys of modern Dutch silver, were everywhere. The chairs and sofas were large, and on this hot afternoon appeared intolerably warm. All the windows were closed, and the general effect of the room was that of vulgar taste, unlimited expenditure, and considerable dirt.

"Ah! my dear, punctuality was always your virtue," cried Mrs. Cohen effusively, as she greeted Mrs. Mossenthal.

Mrs. Cohen was *en grande tenue*, which, as usual, consisted of a dark gown of silk, made exceedingly tight and covered with heavy masses of twinkling jet. She looked as though she were on the verge of strangulation, and fanned herself perpetually.

Mrs. Mossenthal returned the greeting frigidly. She was still yearning after the flesh-pots of the Bedford Park tea-party, and had hoped to attain them if the little affair at Mrs. Cohen's came off punctually. But every moment that ticked from the French clock edged with large paste diamonds put the celebrated Tremayne and his society gathering further away from attainment.

The clock had chimed the first quarter before the aggressive clanging of the bell heralded another member of the

feminine Vehmgericht. The arrival was Mrs. Sam Abrahams, a tall woman with a red face and black eyes. She wore a pink muslin frock and a Leghorn hat garnished with boughs of apple blossom. She was forty-five, but dressed youthfully on account of her waist and hips, which were small and girlish. Mrs. Nathaniel Lemon, who followed, had no romances left either about her age or appearance. The same greasy brown silk which she had worn on great occasions for three years past was drawn in worn puckers and folds about her fat, stayless body. She was very poor and was generally ignored by the Bayswater Jewesses, who long ago decided that Highbury was beyond the radius of an afternoon call. But she claimed a distant cousinship with 'Sac Mossenthal, and Mrs. Cohen had bidden her on this occasion with her two newly married daughters—large blowsy young women with beautiful eyes and loose masses of dark hair—with a view to keeping Mrs. Mossenthal's self-importance in wholesome check.

That lady was quick to note the move, and adroitly determined to play Mrs. Cohen at her own game. Forcing an expansive smile to her pinched mouth, she rose from her chair and bestowed a cordial greeting on Mrs. Nathaniel Lemon, inquiring with effusion after "Nattie," and congratulating the brides, Mrs. Issachar and Mrs. Lionel Josefs, on their marriages. She hoped, in a loud voice, to see more of them in the autumn when she came back from the Continent, and then walked in triumph back to her seat. Mrs. Cohen, who had hoped to suppress Mrs. Mossenthal by the introduction of 'Sac's vulgar relations, was rather nonplussed. Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt's entrance diverted all the ladies. With her quick, bird-like movements and scarcely veiled coarse innuendos, she came as a revelation of a rather shocking sort to the party from Highbury.

"Could'nt get here before," she chirped. "I hope the

fair Mary has not been, and gone. But I've been lunching at the Savoy with old Tompkins, of *Flying Moments*. We've been talking the higher philosophy, till really I don't know where I are. Do you know, Mrs. Abrahams, I often wonder how the world got on before that expression, 'Don't know where you are,' came to be invented. It's so intensely full of meaning, and comes in at all sorts of odd moments."

"And I hope Mr. Tompkins is going to give us something of yours in *Flying Moments*—a little story—or poem," said Mrs. Cohen, by way of making conversation. She did not care for Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt, and had been more than a little vexed that morning at hearing from her that she intended to look in that afternoon to "see the fun."

"A story! a poem!" screamed Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt, shrilly, holding up in affected horror a pair of beautifully gloved little hands. "Heavens! I leave such twaddle to the misses who scribble a bit to add to their pocket-money. No. I believe in facing truths, calling a spade a spade. Why, the *Park Magazine* was turned off all the bookstalls last month because of my paper, 'Sex Studies.' People are so paltry, they like to talk about—well, about philosophy and water. I prefer the genuine thing. Now, I've promised Tompkins a paper on this business of Mary Levinge's. That's why I invited myself this afternoon.

Mrs. Nathaniel Lemon and her daughters grew red. They were very proper, and nothing but a strict sense of the duty they owed to the family had induced them to risk meeting any one so dreadful as Mary Levinge that afternoon.

Mrs. Cohen, too, looked hot and angry. She considered Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt a disgrace to a race which poses to claim both purity and virtue for its women.

Mrs. Mossenthal, on the contrary, let a cold smile creep

over her hard face. She felt that the unspeakable phases of life, as served up according to Mrs. Goldschmidt's pornographic tastes, might prove interesting and amusing, and perhaps compensate for that lost society function.

Mrs. Montagu was announced. Her figure was still as charming as ever, though the roots of her carefully darkened hair gleamed silver-white under a fascinating bonnet. She and Mrs. Cohen had never been friends, for it was to the gossip concerning Mrs. Montagu and Eugene that Mrs. Cohen still attributed the failure of her son's suit with Mary.

But on such an occasion the two mothers made common cause; either one of them might have had the misfortune to have been connected by marriage with that abandoned girl, who, mercifully for them, had preferred the company and houses and immoralities of the Gentiles to an honoured and becoming alliance among her own people.

They were still condoling and congratulating one another, when for the last time the folding doors, panelled with mirrors and decked with gilt carvings, were flung open, and Mary Levinge was ushered in.

The face of every woman present froze into an expression of virtuous horror, as Mary advanced towards Mrs. Cohen, and said with her pretty smile:

"How kind of you to let me know that you would be at home to-day."

Mrs. Cohen gave her a flabby hand-shake, Mrs. Mossenthal a firmer grasp, for she intended to advance her country house at once. Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt stood on the tips of her tiny toes and kissed the girl; she did it to shock the rest. Mrs. Nathaniel Lemon bowed, her daughters peeped beneath their lowered lids at the first "wicked woman" they had ever seen, as though she were an object of fearful curiosity. Mrs. Montagu bent ostentatiously over the tea

table, and began to lisp in a high-pitched drawl to Mrs. Abrahams, who, in her efforts to bow to Mary without incurring the great Mrs. Montagu's notice and consequent displeasure, became purple in the face.

Accepting a chair by Mrs. Mossenthal, and a cup of tea, Mary sat down amid a silence which deepened moment by moment.

The Lemon contingent had not spoken at all, Mrs. Montagu's lisp was extinguished under a large mouthful of almond cake, and even Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt's purposeless chatter died in a nervous giggle.

"How hot town has been this last week, and how glad every one will be to flit to clearer air," said Mary, rather wearily, and sipping her tea.

She looked indeed as though the heat had dragged her terribly. Heavy bistre lines circled her gentle eyes, the pale hair lay dull and lustreless beneath the shadow of her wide white hat, and her mouth was drawn from a curving bow into a pitifully tired droop. Her right hand, from which she had pulled the long suede glove, was slender to transparency, and the tiny jingle of the big flashing rings upon her too slight fingers, touched a chord of womanly sympathy in Mrs. Nathaniel Lemon's commonplace, motherly heart.

"It will indeed be pleasant to get away," said Mrs. Cohen, opening the attack on the unsuspecting girl cautiously. "London has not been a very congenial place of abode to some of us just lately."

"I think it ith a pity the theathon didn't end a month ago," lisped Mrs. Montagu, through another mouthful of cake.

"Or that some people didn't go away before this," feebly mumbled Mrs. Abrahams, in support of her social superior.

Now was Mrs. Mossenthal's chance.

"Perhaps, Mary, you have nowhere to go that you care about. But 'Sac and I are ordered abroad for the autumn, and then meant to come straight back to Cleveland Square, and we shall be pleased if you will go to 'The Nest,' our place in Essex, and stay there as long as you like."

Mrs. Mossenthal's angular form heaved and swelled with pride as she made the offer. Neither Mrs. Cohen nor Mrs. Montagu, with all their money and airs, had a country house to lend any one.

"Thanks very much, you and Mr. Mossenthal are most kind," said Mary, turning shining eyes of gratitude on Mrs. Mossenthal. "Another time I shall be delighted, for every one says 'The Nest' is charming. But although Lady St. Cyprien has pressed me to spend the next two months with her in Scotland, I have decided to stay on in town."

"To stay?" asked Mrs. Cohen.

"Certainly to stay, at any rate for a few months." Unwittingly, Mary had thrown down the gauntlet. Amid a dead silence, Mrs. Cohen and Mrs. Mossenthal exchanged glances. Who was going to pick it up? Who would be the first to point out to this girl the scandal she was about to bring upon the community?

The air in the hot, vulgar drawing-room grew heavy. No one moved but Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt, who settled herself in her chair, prepared to thoroughly enjoy something which would be even better fun than higher philosophy.

Mrs. Cohen shut her fan, cleared her throat and began:

"My dear Mary, we were all friends of your poor, dear grandfather's, and since his death we have taken considerable interest in you and much thought for your welfare, though you have so openly cut yourself adrift from us all, and have shown an undue preference for the society of those who are not of our ancient faith."

Mrs. Nathaniel Lemon, who considered all Christians

outcasts, sighed piously. Mrs. Goldschmidt sniggered into her handkerchief.

Mary coloured slightly.

"Lord and Lady St. Cyprien were faithful patrons of my grandfather, and have been kind to me since my childhood."

"Their friendship does not seem to have done you much good lately," said Mrs. Mossenthal sourly.

The coarse insinuation struck home—Mary flushed scarlet, and putting down her tea-cup, attempted to rise, but Mrs. Cohen laid a hot, heavy hand on her arm and kept her in her seat.

"Now, Mary, you are not going to leave this house before we, who are all old family friends, have pointed out to you the disrepute and scandal you are bringing upon your people. Oh! my dear—you needn't look as though you didn't understand what I meant. We all know what has happened, and what is going to happen."

It was curious to watch the women's dark Eastern faces, as they gathered round their prey, shed every shadow of the veneer of Western civilization, acquired with such pains through the long centuries. They were suddenly transformed into the hawk-nosed, cruel, brainless animals who peep from the latticed windows, or lurk in the dusky doorways of Syrian townships and Mauresque hamlets.

Even the fat features of the Highbury party hardened in the lust for vengeance on the woman who had fallen.

"We know that misfortunes will arise," went on Mrs. Cohen, her society manner disappearing so fast that no one would have been surprised to see her put her arms akimbo. "God forbid that we should be hard judges upon those who are so overtaken. We are all married women." She looked around her as though to reassure herself on that point, "and are thankful for our husbands and our children."

The two brides blushed deeply; and Mrs. Mossenthal, who was childless, and held 'Sac in contempt, frowned. "But such mercies should never blind us to the failings of others —whom we should pity—if they deserve it."

She snorted and stared straight at Mary, who, entirely bewildered at the sudden attack made on her, sat transfixed with amazement.

"But when people do not deserve it——" continued Mrs. Cohen, who was growing intoxicated with the sound of her own voice.

"When they flaunt about without shame among Gentiles," said Mrs. Abrahams, from beneath her juvenile hat.

"And refuthe fine marriageth ath though they didn't care about living rethpectably among their own people," spluttered Mrs. Montagu.

"When the well-meant offers of their own relations to give them a chance of going into retirement for a time are treated with scorn," cried Mrs. Mossenthal spitefully.

"Then there can be no pity or forgiveness, and we feel bound to tell you that we cannot continue to know you or visit you," perorated Mrs. Cohen, unfurling her fan and resuming her society air.

Mary looked from one woman to another as each spoke, with childish, frightened eyes. She had a vague idea that they were vexed with her for preferring Lady St. Cyprien's society and set to their own circle; but her gentle nature could not conceive that she had been trapped into Mrs. Cohen's house to be browbeaten and scolded by these women, to whom she yielded neither submission nor affection.

A plea for some explanation was rising to her lips, when Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt, flinging one leg over the other, and flicking a crumb from her skirt, cried in her most airy manner:

"Who's the man, Mary?"

Pure and sinless as the girl was, the insolent insinuation dragged aside for ever the veil of immaculate innocence behind which her intelligence had lain hidden.

Those words, coarse and base, uttered by a woman of the lowest moral grade, let in that awful light, "the opinion of the world," upon her soul.

Amongst those other friends of hers, friends who were foreign to her race, alien to her belief, whatever of doubt, of wonder, of sorrow there might be, no words save those of love and faith had been spoken in her presence. It had remained for her own people, whom she still hoped to redeem and restore, to cast the first stone at her.

With the blood rushing to her face as though she had been struck, she rose to her feet, looking so grandly tall in her slender height, so royally simple in her straight white robe, among these large-boned, over-dressed Jewesses.

"What man, you say? You believe I have a lover—because I am going to give to the world the earthly embodiment of a spirit? Are you so forgetful of our old beliefs, so ignorant of the tenets of our grand religion, that you will not understand? Have the prophets taught in vain, and the books they have written been read to deaf ears? You are Jewesses—daughters of an outcast race—a scattered nation. Have you no credence in the promise of our God, who has sworn to lead us to our own again? Have you no pride of birth that makes you yearn for the countries and the cities which once were yours by right of conquest? Do you none of you desire to behold your children's children numbered and honoured among the nations of the world? Ah! you are wilfully blind, in that you will not see that the great fulfilment of the prophet's words is at hand. You are obstinately deaf when you will not hear that our God and the God of our fathers is about to redeem the promise made to us, in the hour of our most just

punishment—and that I—I who speak to you now—have been chosen as the poor instrument for your salvation."

Mrs. Mossenthal shrugged her high shoulders scornfully, and Mrs. Montagu sneered all over her pretty, Southern face.

Mary looked round at her tormentors, and the chaste disdain of the maid for the matron rose in her throat.

"Ah! you women, who boast of your virtue in that you have borne children to your husbands. Where is your continence of body, your purity of soul; you who have lain in the arms of men and been subject to them? What is your love but lust, what are your marriage vows but the gratification of base desires? Yet you scorn me, who am soilless from the touch of man, virgin even of his kisses. You dare to tell me that you will not know me, that I have sinned, and am fit only to be cast out from among the company of honest women. Honest! Why, it is you, the wives of men, the mothers of the offspring of men, who are unclean! It is you who are not worthy—except to beat your breasts and pray to our God for mercy. Pray to my child—conceived of no mortal—who is to be born of a pure virgin—pray that he will teach you charity and meekness of spirit."

Torn by the passion of her outraged womanhood, lashed by the coarse tongues and coldly contemptuous eyes of the women about her, Mary Levinge poured forth her indictment and her justification till her flesh failed; then, white as her gown and shaking like a leaf, she sank, sick and faint, upon her knees.

The dead silence about her roused her as no words could have done, and with the subsidence of her passion the sweet spirit of gentleness and humility possessed her once again. With feeble, outstretched hands, and a voice which emotion had rendered flat and almost inaudible, she pleaded to the women about her.

"Pardon me, I pray, and may God forgive me to for my harsh words. What you have said to me to-day is but a test of my strength, a tithe of my probation, and I was weak and have failed. I am sorry."

She rose, and with bowed head and slow steps, even as though she were indeed the sinner the women would fain have branded her, Mary quitted the room.

Mrs. Issachar Josefs, who was already in delicate health, broke the silence which followed Mary's exit with a noisy sob, and was at once removed by her mother in a cab. The others drifted away in various stages of scepticism and amusement.

As Mrs. Dan Goldschmidt went downstairs with Mrs. Mossenthal, she said:

"Well, I don't think she should have insulted us about the men like that, do you?"

Mrs. Mossenthal, who always admitted the impeachment of lovers, smiled palely as she entered her brougham.

CHAPTER XXIV

A November fog hung over London. In Oxford Street and in the West End it was yellow, and acrid with sulphur in the mouth. The gas-lamps burned with a pallid flicker, and the fiery red eyes of the swiftly rolling hansoms looked bleared as they flashed noiselessly by.

Up on the higher plane of Regent's Park the fog was white and soft as carded wool. It lay in billowy waves over the black hollow of the ornamental lake, and hid in fleecy folds the sleeping water-fowl from every sense save that of sound.

Now and again a chill sad wind passed mourning through the gaunt bare trees, and then the white mist rose and fell, swirled and heaved like an intangible, silent sea.

It was late; past midnight, and the faint lights which had jewelled the many windows of the houses in the Outer and Inner Circles had died out one by one.

But through the thick belt of trees that grew round Holmhurst a few points of light glittered, while the sharp crunching of wheels on the gravel drive or the impatient rattle of a champed bit, showed that even at that time of night there were visitors at Mary Levinge's home.

The great drawing-room, with the elaborately gilt and painted ceiling, the walls of white silk, gleaming statuary, and massed palms, looked very empty and desolate in the radiance of the electric light, which, from beneath cream-hued shades of fluted silk, gemmed the room with points of flame. A big fire of beech logs crackled and sputtered on

the wide hearth, and fought the chill, thick fog back to the deep bays of the ceiling. A moon-faced clock in a richly carved case ticked slumbrously from a far corner, and with the restless fluttering of some caged birds, awakened by the light, alone stirred the heavy silence of the room.

Two people, a man and a woman, broke with their still, stiff figures and plain black clothes the garish splendour of the drawing-room. Both were there for the same reason, the hopes of both were fixed on the same goal, the ears of both were straining for the same cry, and yet Lady Theo Bellastier, the frivolous society woman, and Martin Baird, the manager of a Bond Street art shop and the paid servant of Mary Levinge, had never been so far apart.

Lady Theo, with all the chilly instincts of her sex and order, was curled in a wide chair close to the hearth. Her gown of black stuff was ostentatiously simple, and the rebellion of her bright curling hair was hidden beneath the prim, hard edges of a little flat straw bonnet. Her hands and ears were bare of all jewellery, but her femininity and love of finery cried aloud from the coils of a rare rosary and cross of *niello* work which hung from her slender waist to the floor.

Her face was set in grave lines, and her big grey eyes glistened in the fire-flames with unaccustomed tears. Mingled with her feverish religious fervours, the formula for which she had made for herself from half a dozen faiths, was the remembrance of those dark hours in her own brilliant life, when she, too, had striven in mortal agony through the Valley of the Dark Shadow, and with it, and the memory of the tiny dead creature they had told her was her child, came the regret for wasted years and the pitiful wonderment whether all might have been different had her daughter lived.

When she danced and flirted, drove her blood horses in the

Park, or gabbled and grinned through the smoke-wreaths and wine fumes across a card-table, the memory of that time seemed beyond recall, but in moments of solitude, when she went to church, or in the grey dawn counted her losses, or when she watched and waited in silence as she was now doing, the vision of a wee, waxen face slipped between her and all the world.

And what of Martin Baird, sitting stiffly on a couch by the door, his large hands clasped patiently on his knees, and his grey head and thin face bowed upon his breast? Neither the desire for a new religion nor the memory of a dead past filled his aching heart. There, there was no room for ought else beyond an ardent anxiety for the granddaughter of the man who had saved him from starvation—and worse; a heavy grief for that little one whom he had known and loved, carried and caressed since the first hour she had run, the one fresh, young thing among a crowd of antiquities, to greet him. His faithful heart ached and his man's soul sickened to know that she so pure, so innocent, so craving of the world's protection, was crossing, with infinite anguish, that awful path which divides for ever girlhood from womanhood, and that the passage was being made with never a mother's voice, or the touch of a husband's hand, to aid and to encourage.

The sound of swiftly descending feet roused Lady Theo from her dreams, in which miracles and manifestations in the near future mingled with her personal past. She had scarcely time to brush the tears from her lashes—she would blush less to be caught cheating at cards than crying—when the door was flung wide and Noel Marrable entered.

"Is it over?" she cried, springing to her feet.

"Not yet, but I don't believe in too many doctors," he answered, almost roughly.

He put her out of his path and went over to where a

small table stood, glittering with cut-glass decanters and silver dishes.

He looked very pale, and Lady Theo, as she watched him pour out a liqueur of brandy, thought she had never till now noticed how much he had changed of late.

He did not speak again, and Lady Theo crept back to her chair. The fire was burning low and the heavy fog was wreathing round the bright lamps and misting the clear outlines of the pictures.

It grew very cold in the great gorgeous room. Lady Theo fell into a light doze and awoke shivering from a dream that she was walking through a biting snowstorm. Baird was so still that he, too, might have slept. But Marrable—perhaps to keep warm—paced to and fro, an ever-restless, gliding figure. Only he walked with a strangely light footfall, which unconsciously slackened every time he passed the door, as though he feared to miss some sound from above—the groan of a woman in direst pain, or perhaps the first feeble wail of a new-born child.

The logs had died into white dust between the polished silver fire-dogs, and the new November day was three hours old before the strained ears of those who waited caught a swift footfall on the stairs.

Marrable sprang to the door, and opened it, while Baird rose gaunt and grey from his seat as Lady St. Cyprien entered. Anxiety and pity had scored deep furrows on her face, but the tears which filled her dark eyes were of thankfulness and joy.

"It is as she said. Mary has a son," she cried, catching at Lady Theo's outstretched hands and kissing her in an uncontrollable access of womanly emotion.

"A miracle! A miracle is accomplished! The prophecy is fulfilled!" cried Lady Theo, flinging herself on her knees in a frenzy of religious fervour, and bursting into tears.

"A son! Can such things be?" said Baird, with wonder and sorrow.

Marrable's dark face grew grey in the amber light, and a stifled sob caught his throat. Yet it was with his most impassive air that he crossed the room and rang the bell sharply.

"It is very cold here and the fire is out. Have it relighted at once," he ordered the servant who answered the summons. "And bring some tea. These ladies must have something before they go home."

CHAPTER XXV

Mary's son was a fine, handsome child, perfect in form and limb, and marvellously like his mother in the gentleness and serenity of his disposition.

"He is a little angel," said the nurse every day, when she laid the lovely babe, robed in cobweb lawn and filmy lace, beside Mary's pillow.

The faces which pressed for hours so close together, one pale and delicate, almost to ideality, with suffering and weakness, the other small and round, full and pink, with a life that throbbed stronger every day, were wonderfully similar. The baby had the same low broad forehead crossed by pale pencilled brows and shaded by floss-like rings of hair; thick white lids lifted above the elongated grey eyes, and when the wee mouth broke into fleeting smiles, the resemblance was complete.

Sometimes, Lady St. Cyprien unconsciously looked for the impress of some other personality on the child's delicate feature and fair colouring, but always in vain. She hated herself for doing so, and breathed a prayer of thankfulness that she could not discover that which she sought, but feared to find. Yet she was human and a woman, and doubts and wonderings would come unbidden, till again she caught herself gazing on the innocent, and seeking for traces of the guilty.

During the first weeks of her illness, Mary, whose moral fibre had weakened with her tortured body, had yielded a complete submission to the great wave of maternity which

at the first wail of her infant had arisen from unseen depths and overwhelmed her. Without a struggle, she had bowed her head before the waters of human instinct, and with scarcely a memory of past dreams, or a flutter of future hopes, she abandoned herself resistlessly to the animal passion of the great mother-love.

With a crushing weakness numbing her limbs within the downy depths of her luxurious bed, and her brain feather-light from fever and pain, she could yet thrill hotly at the first sound of the babbling "coo" of her baby boy. The touch of the warm round cheek against her own bloodless face, the groping paddle of the tiny, pink-palmed hands in the satiny curves of her throat and bosom, filled her with an ecstasy that throbbed like pain.

She forgot to praise her God according to her lifelong belief that He had sent her people a redeemer, but she hourly thanked the Providence that had given her a child.

Her convalescence was very slow, and she—perhaps with a prophetic fear that with returning health, the ideal would edge about the real—showed an almost morbid dislike to leaving her room. She would be moved to a sofa sometimes, and with the sleeping child held in the warm hollow of her arm would bask the winter afternoon through before the crackling logs and leaping flames.

It was before the cheerful fire, too, that her slender hands found strength enough to perform a hundred offices for her most dear infant. With soft twittering sounds and little smiles and nods that come so naturally to a mother, she would lay the cooing baby on her knees, and one by one, lingering with infinite tenderness over each dainty fastening, she would loose the round dimpled limbs from all swathings and let him kick and leap as young things love to do. Then would her pale, sad mouth part in happy laughter

and her tear-washed eyes dance with delight over each tiny dimple and every delicious curve.

It was her greatest glory, too, to bathe the child, gravely testing with her unringed hands the water's heat, and smiling back in her baby's face as he caught at the sponge and crowed at the fluffy perfumed powder-puff.

Those were the days when she jealously concerned herself with every detail of the child's life, when his waking eyes were reflected in her watching ones, and when he nestled to sleep above her full heart; when every little cry was a torture, but every dimpling smile or feeble finger-clutch of recognition was an agony of delight.

Yet among these fair days, filled to the brim with the stainless love of maternity, came unbidden hours of dread of that great and awful future which was to raise the barrier of divinity between herself and her child. The marvellous fulfilment of her girlish dreams, the prophecy concerning her race's redemption, which she was confident had been realised through her own person, overwhelmed her with vague terrors. She was a woman, with a woman's heart and frail body, human to the core, and with the first love of her life growing hourly stronger within her. But her child—her little baby—her one darling, was beyond humanity, and beyond everything but reverential worship.

When those dark days came upon her, a very savagery of mother-love would seize her. She could not be induced to leave her bed, or to admit any one beyond her attendants, to her room. Not for one moment would she permit any one to touch the child, but, with the infant clasped closely to her breast, would fence him within her arms, as a dumb creature in the face of a coming danger essays to shelter its offspring with its poor body. It was as though she felt that in the inviolable privacy of her down pillows and

silken coverings there lay the great safety and peace of her life to come.

During those happy but too short weeks every sentiment of a woman's nature which should be dedicated to the glories of love were concentrated by Mary on her child. The image of no man had ever shadowed her virgin mind, the voice of no lover had ever stirred the slumbering echoes of her pure heart. There had been no husband with passion's touch to fire her maiden's soul; there was only the child. And the child who had awakened the lover received it all. But with reviving forces the past came back, and the future filled the horizon, and on the last day of the dying year the first act of the sacrifice of the flesh to the spirit was faced and consummated. Mary moved into the boudoir, which adjoined her bedroom.

Outside, the great stretches of the Park lay gaunt and drab under the wet embraces of a dripping fog, but within there was the scent of hot-house flowers and the shaded glow of lamps, low voices and soft footsteps, and the musical tinkle of rare china and old silver from the tea-table.

Wrapped in a costly gown of velvet and fine furs, Mary sat in a deep chair before the fire. Her eyes, looking larger than usual in her pale face, were fixed upon the glowing mass; her hands, palms upwards, lay inert and nerveless on her knees. Outwardly calm and cold as a statue, a very tempest of doubt and misery was tearing at her heart, where the love of the mother and the adoration of the worshipper were holding mighty battle.

The whole drift of her previous life, the very strength of her present belief, rendered it impossible that she should love her child *as* her child, indulge all the tender familiarities and the sweet homely intercourse, or revel in the darling delights of maternity which were granted to the poorest

and meanest of womankind. She had given birth to one who was not of her soul, though he was of her body; who, where she must die, would live; where she might fail, must redeem.

Her love must be tempered with reverence, her adoration must be touched by fear. The mother must be absorbed in the mere instrument of a divine clemency; the queen of the child must be the subject of the deity.

So with her own hands she had put her sleeping baby away from her bleeding heart, and, with arms that ached to snatch him back again, had voluntarily and for the first time laid him in a cradle.

And as the child slept on amid the dim rosy shadow of the silken curtains, Mary stared blindly into the fire and prayed as she had never prayed before for strength; strength to strangle the passion of motherhood; strength to build up a fit temple in her heart for the worship of him who one day would lead her people back to their own; strength to reduce all her love and yearnings within the limits of a wise guidance and a sweet friendship; strength to fulfil to the end her mission, which had but just begun.

Yet for all her high beliefs and stern purpose, the prospect before her was a dreary one; but, once she had set her face, the quiet courage and determination of her nature helped her feet down the road, though her heart-strings snapped in agony at every step.

With her beautiful angel's face set like a mask and her empty hands before her, she prayed—and prayed again, and as the storm died down within her she thought that the answer, and strength, had come to her.

But the child stirred in his cradle and wailed fretfully, and Mary, with her heart in her throat and the blood flying to her pale brow, with outstretched hands and cooing lips, was at his side. Then remembrance, sharp and stabbing,

struck. The first lesson both for herself and her son had to be taught and learnt at once. She turned, and pulled the bell loudly.

"Take up the child; he is crying!" she said to the nurse who came. She was shaking like a leaf as she spoke, but her voice was low and almost cold.

When Lady St. Cyprien called an hour later, Mary was sitting a little distance from the cradle, watching—poor self-starved soul—with wide, hungry eyes, the baby, who was awake, and babbling to himself and his tasselled curtains, those sweet, strange inarticulations which are heaven's own music to a mother's ears.

"Not nursing the baby, Mary?" cried Lady St. Cyprien, as she kissed the girl. "Why, what revolution have we here? Or is it that the young man already scorns to be nursed?" She bent over the cradle, and chirrupped and nodded at the baby, who chuckled back at her. "You bonny boy, are you going to throw aside your mother's love already?"

Mary drew her from the cradle.

"You forget," she said, very sadly. "I am his mother; but he is not my son. He is a great trust confided to me for a time only. But we must not set too great a store on that which is not our own."

The weariness of the flesh and the lowliness of the spirit filled for a moment her eyes with heavy tears, and caught her voice in a thick sob; but she conquered again as she had conquered before, and a little later said, quietly:

"Sit here and watch him playing with those tassels. He is so happy. He needs no mother."

This was indeed to be The Mother of Sorrows.

CHAPTER XXVI

The New Year was born amid clear, bright days and brilliant, frosty nights. Mary gained strength daily, and the faint rose-bloom, which had been one of her girlish charms, again touched the pure pallor of her face with colour.

It was then that Mrs. Marx emerged from the exotic atmosphere of her own apartments, and, after a feeble attempt at compressing her tawdry finery within the limits of a cab-load of luggage, cast from off her feet the dust of Holmhurst.

A young Jewish preacher in the East End had convinced her that by living under Mary's roof she was jeopardising her soul's welfare, and so an incoherent explanation with Mary, followed by an effusive farewell, cut for ever the frail tie which had existed between aunt and niece.

To Mary the severance was almost unfelt. Even in the days when the family had all lived over the Art Gallery in Bond Street, Mrs. Marx had been little more in the child's life than a tangible nonentity. Since the death of Ephraim Levinge she had faded into a vague presence, who was unseen and unheard in the Holmhurst household for month after month. The link of sex sympathy had never been forged between them, and, despite Mrs. Marx's strong Judaism, the bond of blood had proved but weak with her.

But now she had gone, and Mary, though she never missed her, thought a little sadly there was one less soul in the world she might think of as a friend.

For in those days Mary Levinge, the great heiress and the beauty of a season, was very much alone. The Jews had cast her and her great faith from them, for though the very root of their religion lies in the belief that he who shall redeem them shall be borne of a pure virgin, the scepticism of the West had long ago overgrown the simpler Oriental faiths. The prophet's words were often read to them, and were an article of their belief, and perhaps deep in some hearts were retained as a promise of the great future: but before the world they sneered and laughed, as at the idea of the fulfilment of a fallacy, the men holding her a ninny for so trumpeting her shame abroad, the women openly shoulder-shrugging and rejoicing at her social downfall.

But Lady St. Cyprien and Lady Theo Ballastier remained her staunch and true friends. Lady Theo firmly and frankly believed that Mary was a virgin mother, and her child of no earthly parentage. Her jaded palate and dulled sensibilities, *blasés* of every flavour in the world's *menu* of pleasures or excitement, had caught and clung to the one really fresh element which had ever touched her life. A thoughtless superstition, which passed for religion and a certain weariness of the flesh, which did duty very well for a desire to give up the world and its vanities, led her day by day to Holmhurst, where she would sit in Mary's boudoir, gazing enraptured at the child, or work herself into a violent ecstasy of prayer before the Madonna's portrait. Mary had all unwittingly provided Lady Theo with a fresh sensation, and opened a new offshoot from fashion's monotonous pathway. To wear a black stuff gown from morning to night, and a plain bonnet; to sedulously banish all the ripples and curls from her golden head; to give up cards and betting, champagne suppers and rowdy Sunday dinners, entailed sacrifices which were, in Lady Theo's

eyes, redolent of atonement for the past and prophetic of virtue's rewards in the future. A vague personal gratitude towards the woman and the circumstances who had stirred her soul to an awakening, mingled strangely with her ill-regulated religious aspirations.

But with Lady St. Cyprien it was neither the cult of a new mania nor the idle pursuit of a novel sensation which led her most afternoons of the week into the scented warmth and gracious surroundings of Mary's favourite sitting-room. The first intensity of her sorrow for the girl's condition, and the bitterness of disappointment that her nephew's marriage was rendered impossible, had, even before the birth of the little one, died in the tenderest pity. And with that pity, which was as the heart-broken sympathy of a loving mother with an erring child, grew a sincere respect for a woman who in her hours of direst anguish and mortal pain could so preserve her own counsel.

For, worldly-wise and yet not world-hardened, Lady St. Cyprien could but regard the birth of Mary's child as the natural sequel of Mary's fall. Never a fanciful or imaginative woman, she could believe with a sound orthodox belief in the miracle of eighteen hundred years ago. It was her creed, and had been the faith of her family for generations. But that such a manifestation was to be, or could be, repeated, never struck her. The girl's wild talk in the past had never meant more to her evenly balanced mind than the rather fanciful dreamings of a neurotic girl finding vent in speech. The vision which Mary claimed to have seen had been to her merely a more determined effort of a nervous, highly strung imagination, and she had trusted all along to the strength and tenderness of Stansdale as a husband to divert the girl's mind into healthier and wider channels.

But now, with the tangible presence of the beautiful,

sleeping baby before her, with the trembling adoration of a saint, and the holy love of maternity shining from Mary's soft eyes, how was she to regard that past? Surely not as the vague vision of an excitable child, bred in solitude and brought up on the weavings of a dreamy Scotchman's tales. To believe in an Immaculate Conception was, with Lady St. Cyprien, full of sturdy common-sense and intense practibility, beyond all her powers of desire or will. But the same flash of thought which dismissed the idea as absurd, put aside with equal decision the suspicion that Mary Levinge had deliberately sinned.

But that supposition brought Lady St. Cyprien face to face with a dead wall, and drove her back again on the incredible problem of Mary's purity and Mary's motherhood. The two things were irreconcilable, but Lady St. Cyprien was not a woman to be beaten. She contented her large heart with loyalty to and love for the girl, and forced her sense of wonderment to rest. One day the truth, whether it were for good or for ill, would be revealed. Time, or accident, would supply the missing clue.

For the moment there was nothing to do but to visit Mary, cheer her long days, help her with tender solicitude through the wearinesses of a fluctuating convalescence, and sometimes fight her battles out in the world.

Not that Mary was much missed or even regretted in the drawing-rooms through which she had flashed as an heiress and a lovely girl for a few months. A few wise mothers preached to rebellious daughters from the text, "Thou shalt not be found out," and cited the dead art dealer's granddaughter as an awful example. But Mary had never cheapened herself to that low level which, in Society, means popularity. She had never panted, half-naked, in the arms of strange men, in the riotous delights of an after-supper "Barn" dance. Her curved lips had never babbled

uncleanness with all the added salacious charm of affected ignorance. She had never professed the knowledge of the matron, while posing as a maid. No man could claim to have "stood her a dinner" *sans* chaperon at a smart restaurant. She had neither smoked nor betted. She had merely been pretty and dull, rich and proper. Why should Society trouble its frivolous head and shallow heart about her? She was gone; there were plenty more of the same sort to take her place. Among the Israelitish circles of Bayswater and Portland Place she lived a little longer in the *Chroniques Scandaleuses* of stuffy, over-decorated drawing-rooms, until about the middle of January when a disturbance arose in the Mossenthal *ménage*. It was not mentionable among young people, and Mary and her comparatively commonplace lapse were shelved in favour of a spicier and more ticklesome dish of gossip.

Once a week Martin Baird called at Holmhurst, and as Mary grew stronger, the little quiet dinners on Friday evenings and sometimes a chat about the Bond Street business followed. He was always bright and cheerful with Mary, and cooed and clucked at the laughing child as though to the manner born; but when the great front door swung to behind him, and he set out to walk down the lonely tree-fringed roadway of the Inner Circle, his grey head fell upon his chest, and his rough, hard face would soften with dead reminiscences when the mother he had just left was herself a child, treading with airy feet and floating pale gold hair, among the carved oak and rare porcelain, the tapestries and pictures, and old gilt furniture in the Art Gallery. The past, filled with legends and stories, fragments of the world's history, and the weaved imaginings of dreamers' brains, rose up and reproached him. How far the present was born of that past he could not know, only at times a great regret and self-reproach filled his

heart. Perhaps it had all been his fault, and—yet he had always been so fond of her.

Once Mr. Bertie Chant had called and left a card at Holmhurst. He had thought the matter over, and determined that though for the moment it might imperil his position in society, he would "run" Mary Levinge and the new cult in *The Piccadilly Gazette*. If the subject were smartly treated, he felt confident that in common gratitude she would make it worth his while. But two days later, while his scheme for pushing her was still in embryo, he was sent for by Mr. Corney Frankheimer, the latest and vulgarest thing in Cape millionaires. Mr Frankheimer desired a big house, a racing stud, a large visiting list, and advertisement. Mr. Bertie Chant thought that all these ambitions could be gratified—at a price—and so called no more at Holmhurst.

For the rest, Mr. Erastus Bawdon, loud-voiced and reverential, and Dr. Marrable, quiet and coldly professional, were sometimes seen in Mary's boudoir about the hour when the wintry dusk swept like a wave across the deserted Park, and when the silver and china of the tea-table glittered and jingled in the firelight.

CHAPTER XXVII

February's afternoons were already fringing the dreary winter days with glorious sunsets of crimson and gold, but in spite of the lingering light outside, Mary still persisted in having her lamps of wrought silver and rare bronze lit quite early in the afternoons. She had all the instinctive love for light and colour and warmth of her people, and her quietest hours—hours of bodily rest and mental peace—were those she passed among the rose and amber aureoles of the lamps, while the day died a mysterious death across the rain-soaked reaches of the Park.

Beyond touch of her hand, and beyond the reach of her loving lips, the child lay in a nest of soft laces and silken ribbons, asleep. His swinging cradle of satinwood and inlay of tinted pearl was always placed a certain distance from her chair; near enough for worship and adoration, yet just too far for the gay tenderness, the chirping of pursed lips, the fondling of white hands, and all the thousand sweet familiarities which are the visible signs of a heart-hidden mother love.

To Mary, such a sacrifice of desire and instinct could never cease to be an agony, but she bore it, with the same outwardly calm conviction of her position towards the infant which had filled her whole being from that decisive moment when she had seen the vision of the Immaculate Conception.

So she sat, one day, warmly embraced by the deep, soft cushions of her chair. A book in a sombre binding lay

face downwards on her knees. It told of the lives and deaths of those sainted women whose martyrdom has earned for them eternal life in the memory of the world. She loved to read of them, for though every fibre of her own being revolted stubbornly against the faith for which they suffered, the recital in quaint, rude language of their agonies helped her through mere sympathy to bear her own.

But now for the moment she was not reading. Her slender fingers, small and pointed, were laced across the open volume, and her eyes, large and dark with the passion of maternity, were bent on her baby, who, with his pale yellow curls tossed above his low round forehead, and his wee fists clenching the rare lace on his coverlet, slept like a rosy angel on a sun-kissed cloudlet.

And as she looked a great wave of unsatisfied love throbbed up from her heart, and drove a sudden mist of scorching tears to her eyes. A sob, born of an overwhelming self-pity, caught her by the throat, and sent the blood surging in her ears.

But the weakness of the mortal passed, driven back to its source by her indomitable faith in the immortal. As she brushed the tears from her lashes, she found that Dr. Marrable stood before her. She rose at once to greet him, letting her book slip unheeded to the ground.

"I did not hear you announced," she said in tones which all her self-command could not steady. "I was——"

"Dreaming over the fire? Besides, all your carpets are so thick, that one can walk like a cat in your house," replied Marrable, following her to the glowing environment of the hearth, and taking the low chair, which by the accident of habit he generally occupied. He looked at her a little anxiously as she sank once more among her cushions; he had caught the echo of that smothered sob as he had

entered, and even now a shed tear shimmered like a diamond on the band of soft white fur which crossed her breast. An impulse to console, to sympathise, seized him, but he put it from him.

He affected not to notice her condition, and with his usual cold professionalism crushing down the last traces of her emotion and his own involuntary sympathy, he proceeded to inquire after her health.

Half-a-dozen questions and answers exhausted the subject, and then he rose and walked over to the cot.

"How the child grows! There is no need to ask if he is well."

He bent his stern, cold face down over the sleeping child until his lips, set in a hard line, almost brushed the tossed floss-like curls. With one finger he stroked the baby fist, which in sleepy unconsciousness unclosed and stretched to its full dimpled size, then shut tenaciously round the disturbing element.

At that sweet contact, so warmly velvety, so weakly strong, the whole ice of Marrable's face broke up, and Mary, watching from her chair, saw the red blood rise and ebb beneath the swarthy skin, and smiles—real, involuntary—flow from both mouth and eyes.

"You too, see that he grows?" she cried, a happy ring dominating the last faint trembling in her voice.

Marrable raised his head from above the child's face and looked across at Mary sitting in the golden firelight.

"He grows stronger and more beautiful every day. He is so like you."

The compliment—if indeed it were meant for one—fell almost reluctantly from him, but both it and its method of delivery were lost upon her. She only heard that her son was well and strong and beautiful. That he should carry her stamp upon his features seemed only natural; for how

could he bear a likeness which man could presume to trace to that great Entity whom man had never seen?

Then she drifted back to her old dreams once more, and Marrable, gently and reluctantly forcing his finger from that persistent clinging clasp, came again to his low seat by the fire. But all the quiet familiarity of his surroundings, the pure-faced, silent woman, the soft, regular breathing of the little child, failed to still the tumult which the frail touch of *her* baby's fingers had stirred in blood and brain.

His keen eyes shifted from the infant's cot to its mother's chair. To and fro, without a movement of his dark, grizzled head, his glance travelled—only it always rested longer on the snow-hued velvet gown and fair, golden head of Mary and left them more slowly for the cot.

Twice his tongue stirred to break the silence, but old habits of restraint held him in an iron grip that even love was powerless to relax. At the bare notion of speaking love words, a grim smile grew at the corners of his mouth. What could he plead but his loneliness and Mary's invidious condition as reasons for marriage?

The word formed involuntarily in his mind. His whole brain reeled at the idea. His spirit—independent and entirely unused to bow to wishes and opinions other than his own—had for years revolted at the thought of submission to a mere whimsical woman.

And the momentary silence had grown to a quarter of an hour, and still he could not speak. Man of the world though he was, the very intensity of his longing stayed his tongue.

The clock—a Louis XV. toy with a swinging pendulum of enamel and brilliants—chimed four. Then Noel Marrable cleared his throat and spoke.

"Only four o'clock. How the days are drawing out.

Though in here your fire and lamps point at midwinter. Is not Lady St. Cyprien coming to-day?"

"No!" said Mary in dreamy tones. "She has taken Lord St. Cyprien to Brighton for a few days. He had not been well."

"And Lady Theo?"

"I do not expect Lady Theo. She is a little vexed with me, I think, just now. She wishes so much to found a sect at once; to make a cult of—of the child. She has not the patience to wait until such time as he himself can teach us what is right for us to know."

The fervent faith and quiet certainty of her words, uttered with the assurance of true belief, jarred unaccountably on Marrable's nerves. He turned abruptly as she spoke, and cut across her speech almost before it had left her mouth.

"Your life must be sadly solitary just now."

The words were sympathetic, but the tone was harsh and rough, as though he wished to force her thoughts from the intangible future, to the present—and to her own personality.

"Socially perhaps I am a little lonely—but—some day——"

Again Marrable stayed her from drifting back to her faith in the future, her content with the present.

"But has it never struck you that there are other lives to consider; the happiness of others to confirm, beside your own—and the child's?"

"The little one will bring happiness to all the world—some day," she answered, with her shining eyes fixed on her baby's face.

"But meanwhile—until then?" cried Marrable. "What will you do with yourself and your life until then?"

She shifted her calm, passionless eyes from the cradle to his face.

"I can wait!" she said simply, yet with a whole world of patience and abnegation in the three small words.

Marrable rose from his chair and, passing before the fire, came over to where she sat. Her hand, white as milk and smooth as satin, gleamed from among the deep hues of her silken cushions like carven ivory. He bent down and took the slender fingers in his own strong palm.

"Mary, will you marry me?"

Across his face, lowered so closely to her own, the perfume of her hair was wafted. His words were spoken almost in her ear, his hand clasped hers. Both his speech and manner were calm to coldness, but within, his heart was alive with the flame of love.

And Mary—whom neither the passion of Eugene Cohen nor the chivalry of Lord Stansdale had stirred from her virginal iciness—endured at this man's touch, at this man's proposal, one grand thrill of desire. For one brief moment all the womanhood in her young body and blood cried aloud for a mate.

The sensation shocked her. A vague horror of herself, an undefined fear of the man who could so move her nature, filled her, and with the white chasing the red from her shamed cheeks, she drew herself away from all contact with her wooer.

"Be my wife, Mary; let my true love protect you from the world's cruel sneers."

His sensitive fingers had felt and read that overwhelming thrill of sex, and now he put forth his arms and tried to clasp her to him, but she, with every instinct aroused by fear, slipped past him, and, running to the cot, fenced herself behind the frail body of her baby son.

The involuntary act was the very triumph of her belief in the divine power of her offspring to protect his mother, and Marrable could but yield before such a manifestation

of faith. He did not attempt to follow her, for to do so would have been an insult, but with the cot and with the child between them, so near together and yet divided by the faith of a whole people, Marrable pleaded with Mary.

Instinct warned him to make but few protestations of love, but respect, faithfulness and protection he dared and did offer her. He even pointed out to her the loneliness of her life, and the ostracism of herself; almost he would have spoken of the stain upon her name; but that manhood and her own innocence fettered his tongue.

"Do not ask—do not urge—" was all her answer. "You have been my friend. I have so few friends now, as you yourself tell me; do not lose me one of them. Let me still go to you in trouble or sickness; do not rob me of yourself."

Sure of herself once more, she stretched out one hand above the crowing babe, and laid it lightly on his arm.

"My friend, I shall never marry!"

Her face, with its soft, dovelike eyes, and tender, childish mouth, was filled with the strength of her purpose, and he felt that to fight further was useless. Yet there was one thing more he could not help saying:

"But have you fully considered the difficulties of bringing up the child? A boy requires a father's guidance."

Swiftly her fingers fluttered from his arm and were laid across his mouth, which had dared so to blaspheme.

"Hush!" she said, in an awe-stricken whisper. "Hush! The father will surely look after his child."

Marrable turned away abruptly, and taking up his hat, walked silently towards the door.

With it open in his hand he looked once more towards Mary and her son.

Already she seemed to have forgotten his presence. With her hands held above her heart, she stood in an attitude of reverential adoration before the cradle. Shoulder high and

close behind her hung the Madonna's picture, lit by a small lamp. In pose, in colour, in expression, the similitude was marvellous, and to Marrable the one saintly face seemed as unearthly as the other.

She was right; no woman with such a face and such a faith should marry.

"One word more!" Marrable spoke from the doorway. "Forget what has passed, and forgive me. Let us always be friends. Only make me one promise. Should you ever want aid, will you send for me?"

She bowed her head in mute assent, and he left, closing the door quietly behind him, on her and on his love.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Mary's first instinct with regard to Noel Marrable's offer of marriage was to write the circumstances to Lady St. Cyprien, from whom now, in her loneliness, she had no secrets. But even as she sat, pen in hand, and laid against the paper to trace the first words, she hesitated. A faint reflex of the passionate awakening of the flesh which his touch had aroused in her, sent the hot blood to her cheeks, and bowed her head in maidenly shame. The pen dropped from her fingers, and she pushed the paper from her.

"Perhaps, one day, when we are alone, I will tell her," she thought, turning from the writing-table.

But what is hard to write is harder still to speak, and neither Lady St. Cyprien nor any one else ever knew that Marrable had proposed and Mary refused. Meanwhile, the year grew through spring to summer, and the child grew with it. As the days lengthened and became warmer, Mary resumed the ordinary habits of her life, though society knew her no more. She was, however, seen in the Row in the morning, and driving every afternoon, and people said she was lovelier than ever.

A few who craved for reflected notoriety tried to know her; but she did not choose to be so known. Her femininity and natural reserve took fright at once at the first attempts to lionise her, and she refused invitations to every house where she apprehended being stared at or treated as a celebrity. Mr. Bertie Chant's essay to interview her for a new church and stage journal ended in failure, and a

half-mad, wholly blackmailing Rabbi who offered to preach a crusade about the new redeemer—for a consideration—was removed from her house by her servants.

Mrs. Mossenthal, with her long thin nose always a-quiver after notoriety, regularly left cards at Holmhurst once a month, and assiduously bowed and nodded to Mary, as they passed in the whirl of the West End streets.

"The girl is probably mad," she would say to herself, after such an elaborate display of friendship. "But suppose she should turn out to be right after all, how silly every one will look who is cutting her now. Besides, 'Sac is her relation, and it is my duty not to turn my back on her."

But Mrs. Cohen, the "Queen of Bayswater," refused so to trim her sails. She wanted no reflected glory, and no divided allegiance among her followers. In her heart she still hated Mary for refusing her handsome Eugene, whose latest escapade included an actress of extraordinarily ill repute, and an extravagant and rowdy *mênage* up the river. So Mrs. Cohen, who, like all her sex, loved to find a reason for everything, believed that her son's evil courses were caused by Mary's heartless conduct, and preached open war against her accordingly.

Mary at this time found her chiefest honour at Mr. Erastus Bawdon's flat. His Roman Catholicism was now largely tinged with Judaism, and he was forever seeking and finding analogies between the two religions. He frequently discussed the possibility of converting his new church in Berkshire into a Synagogue. In the interval of making up his mind on this distracting point, he commenced building a small convent, which with its tiny chapel would, when completed, enhance and perfect the beauties of the church.

For the fit decoration of this retreat, which was to be

dedicated to the Holy Mother, Mary sat to a new artist, though not as a maiden with empty folded hands, and eyes that wondered what the world might be, but as the Virgin Mother, with the fulfilment of maternity glowing in her face, and the veil across her bosom clutched by pink baby fingers. A statue, too, in purest white marble, was modelled in her likeness, for the further beautifying of the little chapel, which Erastus Bawdon desired to make a gem among the fairest prayer-houses of the world.

Yet, though at Mr. Bawdon's rooms the talk often turned on the future, and the methods by which the human race were to learn of the new faith, and of the birth of a virgin's son, Mary stedfastly drew the line at propagandaism.

"Neither you, nor I, nor any one can know what the true message is," she would say, with her fervent eyes fixed on the little one, who kicked and laughed so gleefully at her feet. "The world is full enough of false faiths; let us not add one more to the number. In good time he will speak."

As the child grew in intelligence, so Mary fought with her love and her instinct. The sacrifice of motherhood was daily made, and custom could not rob it of one pang. The babe had a beautiful character, loving and sweet. He was a child whom the least instinctively mother-woman must have adored, and Mary, whose every fibre was enwrapped in her son, was the embodiment of worship before him.

But always at a distance. Even when he held out his wee hands to her, and leaped in his longing to be near her; even when his fresh, dewy mouth puckered into a wail of disappointment; even when his eyes laughed into hers with joy at sight of her, she withstood the temptation to clasp him to her breast, to kiss and tickle his white warm little body, to toss him in mid-air, and roll him in mimic wrath among the downy pillows.

Only, sometimes, when she had the baby to herself, she would kneel in humble reverence, and clasp the restless, rosy feet and pray for future mercy for herself and on the world. For the very sweetness of the child's disposition was as a wall between the mother and her son, and every smile and coo were as the lashes of a torturing whip upon her naked heart.

It was late autumn before Mary met Dr. Marrable again. Design on his hand had kept them apart, but on Mary's side it had been merely chance. Her life was too intensely strained towards the future, too painful in the present, to retain more than a shadowy memory of the past, and except that now and then she heard his name from Lady St. Cyprien or Lady Theo Bellastier, she might almost have forgotten his existence.

It was in Bond Street that they met. The winter's day had died in the arms of evening, and Mary, crossing the pavement quickly from a brilliantly lit shop to her carriage, ran right into the arms of an advancing figure.

Mutual apologies revealed their identities.

"I have not seen you for an age. How have you been?" asked Marrable, standing between Mary and the carriage.

"Very well indeed."

"And the little one—the boy; is he well?"

A grave reproach filled her eyes, and drew her mouth into a sweetly stern expression.

"Well? How can you ask? How can he ail?"

"I beg your pardon," he said, quite humbly for so proud and stiff a man. "I did not remember."

Mary drew forth one hand, all warm and scented, from her muff, and held it out, a charming peace offering, to Noel Marrable.

"Please don't apologise. But, indeed, he has never suffered one moment. Ah! if you knew how worthy he is, in

body and soul, how he bears in every feature a stamp that is all immortal. But will you not come and see him one day? You will understand then what I mean. I can feel in my heart all that he is and will be; but," she smiled in a deprecating fashion, and shook her fair head, "I never could talk cleverly or well. I cannot express to you quite what I would say. But do come—come to-morrow. It is his birthday."

Then she entered her carriage, and was driven down the glittering streets of gaily lit shops to the Art Gallery, where for an hour she discussed business with Martin Baird.

As she rose to go, she said to Baird:

"Who do you think I met on my way here, Martin? Dr. Marrable, whom I have not seen for a long time. You remember him, of course?"

Baird looked keenly at his mistress from under his shaggy brows.

"I know him well, Miss Levinge. He is in here at least once a week."

"Here!" cried Mary. "What does Dr. Marrable come here for?"

"He is quite a china maniac in a small way," answered the old man, with his eyes still fixed on the girl's face, as she bent over the fire. "He drops in and looks round and buys something every few days, and always has a chat with me."

A question trembled on the tip of Mary's tongue, a question that must have occurred to every woman under like circumstances. She blushed at the idea it suggested, then blushed again, as her sex and curiosity conquered.

"When did Dr. Marrable first take to buying old china, Martin?"

"About last February; and when he comes he always asks after you—and the child," said Baird, in his most ungracious manner.

He had noted the hesitation, and caught sight of the burning blush, and it hurt his faithful soul that Mary should have kept a heart-secret from so old and true a friend as himself.

No further words passed between mistress and man. Mary mused by the fire, as she slowly buttoned her gloves; Martin Baird busied himself in putting away in the safe the ledgers and letter-books which had been taken out for inspection.

Presently she turned from the fire, and held out a hand in farewell.

"Mind you come to-morrow; it is the child's birthday; besides, Mr. Bawdon wants to speak to you about a Carlo Dolci he has been offered. And, Martin, unless you are sure of a speedy market, I don't think we had better have that Raphael from Clydesmere Castle. Eleven thousand pounds is a good deal to sink for an indefinite time; and some day, it may not be very far off, all the money I can find may be wanted to help *him*."

As she drove northwards to the Regent's Park, the memory of Noel Marrable forced itself upon her.

"So he does have news of me sometimes," she mused. "How grey and aged he looked by the lamplight outside Redfern's."

CHAPTER XXIX

THERE was to be a little tea-party at Holmhurst. Lady St. Cyprien, who had been out of health for some time and was on the eve of leaving England for the south, was coming, and a few mutual friends were expected to bid her "Good-bye."

Intent on seeing Mary alone, Lady St. Cyprien arrived early, only to find she had to wait a while for her hostess. As she sat before the fire this dull January afternoon, she wondered a little sadly if there would be any gaps in the ranks of those she loved when she returned next summer.

Mr. Erastus Bawdon's sonorous, oily tones interrupted her reverie. He was larger and more overwhelming in presence than ever and more pronouncedly ecclesiastical in his garb. But his conversation was eminently worldly, and he chattered of theatres and shooting-parties, the latest scandal in hunting circles, and the newest *liaison* of a favourite dancer with infinite appreciation.

By the time he had exhausted his leading themes he gave his voice a rest, only inquiring if the Countess had any gossip to retail.

"None of very great general interest, I'm afraid," said Lady St. Cyprien, in her gentle, quiet way. "Though St. Cyprien and I were very pleased at a little bit of family news we heard this morning. Stansdale is going to be married."

"Really!" exclaimed Mr. Bawdon. "Why, I always thought——" And he glanced about him.

"That his love for Mary Levinge was incurable. Yes; so did we all. Indeed, for a time I think he half hoped to win her for his wife. But he now sees the uselessness of it; and he is a man who appreciates his future responsibilities. He knows, too, how much we—St. Cyprien and I—long to see the old line firmly re-established before we go; and so he is going to marry early in the spring. She is a charming girl—Lord Dulverton's second daughter—very bright, and will have money when her grandmother the Dowager dies. It's a good match, but—I wish——" Lady St. Cyprien finished her sentence with a sigh, which changed to a smile as the door was flung wide, and a patter of tiny feet and the ring of a baby voice announced Mary and her little son.

The little boy, who was tall and slender for his three years, rushed impetuously into Lady St. Cyprien's arms, with his fleecy, golden curls a-flying and his scarlet mouth puckered like a rosebud, for a kiss.

Mary, who with the child had just returned from her drive, and into whose cheeks the keen, damp air had whipped a rich colour, until her face glowed like a jewel above the setting of her snowy furs, excused her lateness on the plea that the fog outside was growing thicker, and that her coachman had lost his way.

It was on the tip of the Countess's tongue to say that the child should not have been out on such a stormy afternoon, but the custom of the past few years had taught her to maintain silence on the question of the little one's well-being.

"In the corner behind the screen are some toys," she said lovingly to the little boy.

Mary busied herself in removing the child's thick white coat and soft fur cap. She touched him very gently, yet always with an air of restraint and humility which had

now become habitual with her in her relations with her child.

"Is he not beautiful?" she said in low tones to Mr. Bawdon, as the baby, shaking himself free from her tender clasp, trotted away in search of the new toys.

"His beauty is not of this world," murmured Erastus Bawdon, in his most clerical manner. "It is godlike."

Mary quivered and smiled in one breath. Words such as these were mingled gall and honey to her. At once they emphasised the difference which lay between herself and her son, and confirmed her own great faith in him. She clasped her hands almost convulsively as she whispered back:

"Yes, you are right; he is godlike!"

And then she permitted herself to taste her one drop of maternal pleasure. She sat and watched her baby as he played before the fire at Lady St. Cyprien's feet. His new treasure was a train, with a fine large engine and a long string of carriages, all of gaily painted tin. His delicate hands, long and narrow like his mother's, and with the same curved finger-tips, his graceful body and his tongue just learning to express intelligent joy or sorrow, were never still for one second. Fair and fragile as he looked, there seemed an everlasting fund of vitality and energy in the little form and budding brain.

And as the mother watched, she saw from beneath her lowered lids, as in a beatific vision, her child still fair and slender and crowned with the pale halo of his amber curls, standing as a preacher amid crowds of disciples, marching at the head of vast armies of reclaimed souls, a divine ruler in that great city which would rise at his command and be the capital of her people's new kingdom. Then would her son, and the son of one greater than she, stoop from his throne, and take her by the hand and show her to all the

world as that chosen one from whom the world's redemption had sprung.

"Mary, Mary, my dear!" whispered Lady St. Cyprien. "There is something I want to tell you. Some one may come in presently and mention it, and I think you would rather hear it from me."

Mary roused herself from her reverie and went over to the couch, while Mr. Bawdon struggled down on to his knees beside the child, and asked to be initiated into the mysteries of "trains."

"Sit down, dear," said Lady St. Cyprien, possessing herself of one of Mary's hands as the girl sank on to a low stool. "I want to tell you that Stansdale is going to be married. You know where our wishes have lain in the past, but——?"

The Countess paused; for the moment her usual *sang froid* deserted her, and she sought in vain for a few kindly words to complete her sentence.

The child shouted merrily to her from the rug, and she smiled back at him.

Mary smiled too, and pressed Lady St. Cyprien's fingers in her own.

"It was not to be, dear friend. But I am so glad Lord Stansdale is going to marry. I hope he will have a good wife; he deserves one. Will you tell him from me that I congratulate him, and wish him every happiness from the bottom of my heart?"

When tea was brought Mr. Bawdon rose, red and hot, from his knees, handed the cups, and turned the conversation to the little convent near his church, which was completed, and was shortly to be occupied. From the convent to church music and ecclesiastical art the chat drifted on, rising and falling like a tossed ball in the warm luxury of the drawing-room, while the child played quietly on the floor.

So the friends might have talked for hours, but that the entrance of Dr. Marrable broke up the circle, and brought a whiff of the dank air of the winter evening into the room.

"Ah, do not let me drive you away," he cried, as Mr. Bawdon rose from his chair.

He held out a big strong hand to Mary's son, who, wearied by play, sat among the wreckage of the brightly coloured train. The little one, with sweet confidence, slipped his baby palm into Marrable's.

"Miss Levinge," he said, as he clasped the tiny fingers. "Your room is too hot. This little hand is like a coal."

"He has been playing before the fire for some time. He is quite well," cried Mary quickly, moving her chair back from the blaze, and drawing the child towards her till he leaned against her knee. Marrable took his tea and sipped it almost in silence. His presence seemed to have cast a chill upon the party. Grim and stern, he sat upright in his chair, forcing a remark from his lips now and then.

"Tired, Noel?" asked Lady St. Cyprien presently, more to break the silence which was growing oppressive than for any wish for an answer.

"Yes, I am rather," he said. "I've not been to bed for three nights, and though I'm pretty strong, there were circumstances connected with the case, which——"

He set down his cup and left the sentence unfinished.

"Was it a very bad case?" said Mary gently.

"It was inflammation—a—little child—the only one. It died this morning at seven."

The words dropped from his set mouth abruptly, and his face turned grey in the sparkling firelight.

"The little child is at peace," said Mary very quietly. "But the mother—the poor broken-hearted mother—how terrible for her!"

There was an intense pity in her voice, but the faint smile which curved her mouth was the smile of perfect happiness. At least, if the common joys of motherhood were denied her, the commoner sorrows of sickness and of death might not come near her.

Still with the smile on her face, she turned moist eyes of sincerest sympathy on Marrable. The strange attraction that sometimes lies between two people drew his eyes towards her at the same moment.

In another second he was leaning forward in his chair, one hand stretched down to the child who had, as though tired out, slipped to the floor at Mary's feet, and pillowed his head in the folds of her gown.

"I do not think—I am afraid—that your little boy——"

"Nonsense Marrable," cried Mr. Bawdon in reproving tones. "You are tired and have got sick children on the brain."

"He's a little flushed and sleepy, that's all," said Lady St. Cyprien from her arm-chair. "Mary, dearest, I hate to lose him, but the wee one is so worn out it would be only kind to send him to bed."

The smile of faith was on Mary's mouth, though the mother-love and mother-fear had dilated her eyes, as she stooped to raise the curled-up form nestling so warmly against her feet.

The child wailed fretfully as she touched him.

"Allow me!"

Marrable had been quicker than she, and now held the drowsy baby in his arms.

For one swift second the instinct of maternity had Mary at its mercy and her eager mouth brushed across the little hot face. But she drew back before the kiss was complete, and the great faith that was in her quelled the anguish in her widened eyes.

"Wants to go to bed, I'se tired," murmured the child, twisting restlessly in Marrable's arms.

"I will carry him upstairs," said Marrable.

In the hall he faced Mary, still with the baby in his arms.

"Miss Levinge, the child is very feverish. I fear he has contracted a severe chill."

Mary caught her breath, but her face was set and her voice steady.

"I think not, Dr. Marrable. The drawing-room is very hot, that is all. Why, you might as well say that I am feverish."

She laid one burning hand, which, despite her self-control, shook like a leaf, on his cool fingers.

"I am sorry I cannot agree with you, Miss Levinge," answered Marrable curtly, moving towards the staircase.

As he gave up the little one at the nursery door, he spoke again, almost entreatingly.

"If he becomes worse, promise me you will send for me."

In the light that gleamed from the open door he saw her look at him. A supreme pity for his lack of faith, and a boundless belief, shone in her eyes.

"You are very kind, Dr. Marrable, but you do not understand. All will be well with the child."

CHAPTER XXX

"All will be well with the child!"

Mary's simple words seemed prophetic, for when the next morning her little son came into her room he looked almost as fresh and sweet as the bunch of white violets he brought her as an offering. Only the merest shadow beneath his blue eyes gave faint evidence of the feverish attack of the previous day.

"Muvva," he cried, lifting himself on tiptoe and laying his perfumed present on Mary's pillow, "Here's some pitty flowers for 'oo." He looked gravely at her as she lay, fair and white among the rich laces of her bed.

Mary lifted one of her son's wee hands and kissed the rosy little fingers reverently.

"You are well to-day, my child?" she asked.

"Es! I fink so. May I go a ride vis morning?"

Mary rose, and, drawing a dressing-gown round her, went to the window. Autumn mists were hanging among the trees, but a pale sun was already fighting for a glimpse of earth, and the day promised fair.

"In an hour, dear, you may go. See, let us ring and order White Rose for ten o'clock."

The child listened while his mother gave the order for his donkey to be saddled, then, as she crossed to the fire to sip her chocolate in the circle of its warmth before dressing, he came to her side and chatted his bright baby talk till she laughed.

And when he left her to be dressed for his ride, she

smiled again at the recollection of Lady St. Cyprien's foolish fears and Marrable's prognostication of illness.

Household duties—for in those quiet times she was much among her women—her drive, and business with Baird at the Art Gallery occupied her day until the wintry dusk had fallen and a bitter wind cut fiercely down the wider streets. As she stepped from her carriage into the white warmth of the splendid house, a thrill of physical pleasure in the beauty and comfort and perfumed luxury of her surroundings passed through her.

"How happy—how blest I am!"

The words left her lips involuntarily as she began to mount the wide stairs towards her own room.

"If you please, ma'am, Nurse would like you to go to the nursery."

Her own maid, Carter, met her at her bedroom door with the message, and, though Mary did not notice the circumstance, did not even offer to delay her by removing her outer wraps.

With the costly white velvet and heavy fur of her pelisse still clasped about her, Mary mounted the next flight of stairs and ran with swift feet to the nursery.

At the doorway she paused, reproaching herself for such unnecessary haste, and as angry as her gentle nature could be with the fanciful and over-anxious servant.

With a smile on her lips, though her breath still came fast from her run, she opened the door and went in.

The nursery was a large room, lit by three windows, which, in summer-time, gave charming views across the lawns and tree-tops. Now they were curtained close with warm draperies of white stuff, on which loving fingers had worked in gay wools a thousand quaint images drawn from children's lore.

A swinging lamp made a bright circle over the table, now

spread for tea, but the room was not so light that a large fire dancing behind the high guard did not fling merry rays and leaping shadows into the further end, where stood the nurse's bed and the little white and silver cot of the child. A wardrobe and a cupboard sacred to toys, flanked the bright fire, before which was Mary's favourite low seat, and the fanciful little basket chair given the child on his last birthday. The two chests of drawers and the wash-hand-stand and toilet table stood in a small dressing-room leading from the nursery, where also burned a cheerful fire. Pictures—principally of animals—adorned the walls, and a tall clock that chimed at each quarter, stood between two of the windows.

The room was delightfully warm, bright, and comfortable, yet even as she set her foot upon the threshold, the instinct of the mother warned Mary that all was not well.

"What is the matter? Why do you send for me?" she said quickly, closing the door behind her and advancing into the room.

Between the tea-table and the bright, high guard of steel, was a great strew of toys—a sure sign in a well-ordered nursery of discontent or illness. Noah's animals were jumbled with the wreckage of a ship and the scattered buildings of a farmstead; wooden bricks and letter blocks, picture puzzles and railway cars, were direfully commingled. A broken drum and battered trumpet reposed amid the ruins of a camp and the remnants of a leaden army. A mechanical bear lay on its side, still moving its legs and head slowly. A hundred picture-books, in every state of dismemberment, lay like wind-blown leaves, and the scrap-book's back was broken past repair.

The child sat in his own little basket chair. The brilliant cretonne-covered cushion which belonged to it was pulled up behind his head. His cheeks were like scarlet

peonies, and his eyes like stars—glowing from behind a veil of mist. His tiny hands were plucking idly at the ring of stiff black hair that toy-makers by tradition ascribe to Japanese dolls.

"Why, my child, all your toys out, and thrown aside? Are you so tired of them?" said Mary, forcing a smile to her lips.

The child looked at her, then, without speaking, turned his attention again to the doll's head.

"I think he is ill, ma'am!" interposed the nurse. "He enjoyed his ride this morning, but would not eat his dinner, and this afternoon nothing has suited him. He won't touch his tea, and he's so cross that I——"

Mary stopped the flow of words with a gesture, while her straight brows drew together in displeasure.

"The child ill! The child cross!" How could such words be said to her?

She pulled the glove from her right hand, and laid it, still cold from the outer air, tentatively, and as though she were committing a liberty, against the child's hot face.

"Oh! how lovely. You is so cold—and I'se so hot—so hot."

With little palms that scorched like living flames, he drew her slim fingers across his burning mouth, and mumbled them as though he would draw coolness from them.

Mary knelt by her son and yielded both her hands to his hot, clinging clasp. She spoke to the nurse over her shoulder.

"The child is over-heated. How high is the thermometer here? Over seventy? I thought so. Open the door at once and take some of that fire off. Light candles and lower the gas. This room is far too warm."

Presently the child grew cooler and drowsed in his chair,

with his mother still kneeling by his side and holding the gentle coolness of her palms on his baby face.

Outwardly she was quite calm, for the nameless fear of yesterday had not come to her again, but in its place was an overwhelming sensation of annoyance—against whom?

Was she vexed with Lady St. Cyprien, who had said the child was over-tired? Was she angry with Dr. Marrable, who had foretold with such insistance a prospective illness? Or was she merely annoyed at the foolish whims of a fussy, ignorant domestic?

She did not know. Only her usually meek spirit was roused to revolt against these unbelievers, who would not grasp the truth before them; these scoffers, whose eyes and ears were blind and deaf to all they did not choose to understand.

Of her own humanity she doubted not. She was the offspring of a man and of a woman, and must suffer in the flesh and perish as all such offsprings do. But her son was not such as these. His coming was a miracle; his invulnerability and infallibility were certain. And she had proof if she had desired it, for during the brief years he had lived on earth among the people he had been born to redeem and save, no common pang of childhood had come to him. His health had been as perfect as his body.

And so Mary, with her scorn of poor mortals over-riding for once her gentleness, soothed her child into a doze, and then turned triumphantly to the nurse.

"You see, now that the room is cooler, baby is perfectly well, the fever has quite left him. Put him to bed now, he will be asleep in a moment."

She rose to her feet and brushed her fingers once more across the child's forehead.

"He is quite well; quite well!"

Mary spent the evening in praying at her white altar for

forgiveness of her heart-sin. How could she expect the people of the world—even those who knew the truth—to yet awaken from the sleep of indifference, selfishness, and unbelief, which had enwrapt them for all ages? It was not for her to chide or to preach. He who was promised in a vision, and made manifest by a miracle, would rouse the souls of men and warm their hearts of stone in his own good time. And with repentance in her heart and hope for the future in her eyes, Mary lay down to rest, after thanking God for His mercy to herself and to her people.

She never knew how long she had slept, when the touch of a hand on her arm, the flare of a light in her eyes, and a frightened voice crying incoherently in her ear, woke her with a violent start.

"Ma'am, come at once! Baby is very ill! Come to him!"

Mary leapt from the bed. Pushing the tangles of her hair from her sleep-laden eyes, she stared about her. The rose-shaded night lamp showed her that she was alone, but the open door and the sound of footsteps in rapid retreat, forbade the hope that voice and touch had been a dream.

Dashing a little water across her face and catching up a wrapper, Mary sped towards the nursery.

But as she neared it, she paused; her feet, her very breath stilled by a monotonous sound of a low ceaseless moan. Inarticulate as the cry of a dumb animal, it struck her with an awful sense of fear and impotence. Surely it was mortal pain and suffering that found voice in such a wail.

With her knees trembling under her, and her heart thumping against her side, Mary staggered, rather than walked into the nursery.

"Oh, ma'am, thank heaven you've come. The poor lamb! See how he suffers!"

Mary put the weeping woman aside with a very gentle touch and walked to the child's cot.

During one moment that seemed an eternity of suffering, the whole edifice of her faith was shaken. She clutched the silver cot rail, as though body and soul were tottering to their everlasting fall.

Lying amid the tossed bed-clothes, the rare beauty of his face marred by a deep flush, and his eyes, twin lakes of blue, upturned beneath the puffed eyelids, lay her child.

With untiring restlessness, his head turned from side to side on the pillow, and always that helpless moan broke in gusts from the hot mouth.

For a moment his mother's presence seemed to soothe him, a startled stare of recognition crept into the unconscious eyes, and there came a pause in the ceaseless mutter. Mary checked the cry to heaven for help that rose to her own dry lips.

The swift passing of time that stayed the flow of the delirious words, and gave the child over once more to the awful clutches of the ravaging brain fever, restored to Mary her strength and steadfast faith.

Like balm the flood of her whole life's beautiful ideal swept across her trembling heart. A divine confidence shone in purest radiance from her eyes, which still rained tears of love and motherhood; the pitiful smile of one who will not be denied peace curved the corner's of her sad mouth.

She turned very quietly to the excited nurse.

"You did well to call me; but there is nothing to fear. The child has a feverish cold, and talks in his sleep. Give me a chair, please. Since you are afraid, I will stay here and watch with you."

And as she took the seat offered her, there came the sound of baby prattle from the bed, which said pathetically, oh! so pathetically:

"Kiss me, and say good-bye."

She leaned over the rail of the cot and placed her cold white cheek against the burning face of her cihld.

"I'se going for a long ride, such a long ride. Kiss me and say good-bye."

From the other end of the room came the sobs of the nurse, and Mary had not the heart to reprove her.

CHAPTER XXXI

"The little boy is very ill, sir. Nurse said he was awful bad last night, and my mistress ordered her out of the nursery for saying so. My mistress is up there now. Will you like to go up, sir, or shall I say——?"

"You need not trouble. I will go upstairs. I know the way."

Dr. Marrable strode from the chill outer darkness of the winter evening into the warm luxury of the hall at Holmhurst, where the carven oak panel, touched with light lines of dead gold, were draped with priceless tapestries, where the tread of feet across the floor of white marbles was deadened with soft-hued Eastern rugs. He gave his hat and coat to the servant, and then with more than usual deliberation started to mount the low, wide stairs.

A marble nymph, with perfectly modelled form and taper beckoning finger, laughed and leered at the head of the first flight, but her fascinations were without avail, even though the glow of pink-shaded lamps turned her snow-cold charms to the palpitating semblance of the fairest flesh and blood.

Slower and slower lagged his heavy footsteps, and the servant who stood below watching him, thought "the doctor must have had a mortal hard day's work, to be so tired."

But once the turn in the stairs hid him from prying eyes, Marrable ran like a boy to the second floor and hurried on stealthy light feet down the long corridor to the heavily curtained doorway, behind which he knew the nurseries lay.

Within, a frail little body was fighting the great battle of life and death, and a woman, with eyes that ached to weep, and a heart that fainted as the weary hours went by, was fighting too—the awful fight of faith and fear.

For Mary, despite her grand belief in her God, her child, and herself, was racked with all the terrors and anxieties which are the entail of maternity. Every twist of the tiny tortured limbs, every movement on the pillows of the crimsoned baby face, every wail from the fever-parched mouth, wrung a responsive cry of pain from her lips, while cruel doubts and mad desires to question truth, hammered at her heart's citadel of faith.

For forty-eight hours she had watched by the side of her child's crib, and twenty-four of them she had passed alone with him. For when the frightened nurse had begged for medical aid, Mary had thrust her from the room, and kept her vigil alone.

From that supreme moment, when Mary had vowed herself the mother of her child in little more than name, and had forced a distant adoration to suffice her for all outward manifestations of maternal affection, she had suffered as only mothers can, and endured as only martyrs could. But her sense of certainty and security in the strange position she had taken up, helped her to stand as she had done for three years, a humble worshipper, a meek and willing slave, at the foot of the throne of the redeemer and savior of her people.

Her calm and steadfast temperament, which lacked the wavering weaknesses and wind-tossed fancies of her sex, aided her in her great resolve of abnegation and humility, while every deadened desire for the soft touch of her baby's lips, the sweet clinging of his dimpled hands, only went to feed the fires of her immutable faith.

But now this sudden illness of her life's idol had strained

her self-control and her powers of belief to cracking point. That the child might die did not occur to her, even in her moments of deepest fear and grief; but that he suffered as other poor mortals suffer, was sufficient trial to her.

Yet she would do nothing. Above the mother's love for the child of her body towered the soul's worship of the spirit. To seek for human aid would be to outrage a power mightier than her own belief. She did not, dared not, even pray for her son's welfare, for to do so would imply a stain upon herself, the chosen instrument of a divine clemency, and would cast the shameful shadow of weak doubt upon the radiant glory of the beautiful future. So she had passed the hours in watching and in suffering, moving from her knees only to give the unconscious child a few drops of milk, or to smooth the tumbled pillows beneath the tossed yellow curls of the ever-restless little head.

Marrable found her so, as he parted the curtains and quietly opened the door. The child was moaning heavily, her ears were throbbing responsive to the ceaseless cry, and the slow hot tears were dropping one by one on her clasped hands. She did not hear him enter, nor did she note his presence till he emerged from the shadows into the ring of amber light which fell from the lamp in the centre of the room.

As though his coming portended some new evil, she started to her feet, as a frightened hind leaps from the brake. Her eyes dilated and grew dark with terror; her outstretched hands beat the air as though to drive him from the room.

"Why are you here? What have you come for?"

She had not spoken for hours, and her voice sounded sharp and shrill.

"Why have you come?" she cried again.

She left the bedside, and, advancing into the circle of the clear light, stood close before him.

Words came not to him at first. His quick run up the stairs, the close warmth of the nursery atmosphere, the faint, ceaseless moaning from the little bed, and the agony of the woman he loved, strangled the voice in his throat.

He merely looked at her, and with his gaze grew the knowledge of a great change—the change which, in a few short spaces of time, envolves a woman from a girl.

He saw a slight, loose garment of white silk with wide sleeves, swathed and twisted round her slender body with so little care that it had parted at the throat, and let a long coil of loosened hair curl like a golden snake into the whiteness of her bosom. About her face, the pale locks, ruffled into an ambient cloud, gleamed in the lamp-light like the faint reflex of a glory.

He saw the cold purity, the exclusive atmosphere of immaculate virginity broken up, shattered for ever by the common anguish of all womankind. The sharp, fine lines of maidenhood were gone from face and form, lost in the fuller amplitude of an anguished maternity that was tortured with fear, and only able to cry with the shrill, impatient iteration of nervous suspense:

"Why have you come?"

Noel Marrable saw and read as in a book her mother's heart and mother's fears, her virgin's soul and mighty faith. He saw the awful struggle between the motherhoods of God and man. And as the tragedies of her past, her present, and her future were laid bare before him, his heart, that had suffered neither mercy nor love for any woman, bled for her and for her sex.

"The servants sent for me. They said the child was ill, and I have come to help you—if I may."

He put her aside and walked to the crib, where the golden head was still rolling to and fro.

Mary followed him slowly. Her womanly dignity and

self-control left her for a moment, and she cried fretfully, like a child who is over-tired:

"Ill! They said the child was ill! They do not understand; I cannot get them to believe me that he only has a cold—a feverish cold. Any one might get that this weather. He is flushed and restless now. Nurse kept the room so hot, and then told me that some one should be sent for. But it's not so warm now. I have only kept a small fire all day. Of course the evening is always a more feverish time; I remember my nurses told me that when I was ill myself."

In staccato sentences, broken by short, nervous sobs, she rambled on, following aloud an endless train of self-delusive talk, and finding—poor, hungry soul—a crumb of comfort in that Marrable did not contradict her.

He did not hear or heed. One glance had revealed to him the swift-coming end, one touch of his firm fingers upon the scorching skin of the quickly pulsing wrist had shot the bolt which struck him to the heart. Every effort of his will, every tutored power of self-control were called forth to help him bear the truth, and keep silence, for her sake.

Mary laid light fingers on his arm.

"I think he's quieter now, Dr. Marrable. Won't he fall asleep soon?"

Then he spoke tenderly, soothingly, as though he were humoring a fractious child.

"Yes, yes; he will fall asleep very soon now."

Mary was but a woman, and the words of a man with the strong personality of the sex which every instinct of the Jewess is bred to acknowledge as her superior, eased the tension of her nerves. With a little, hard sob she sank once more to her knees. Her first displeasure at his presence had yielded to a vague sense of comfort and confidence;

and as she knelt she raised her eyes from time to time from her child's face and let them rest on Marrable's dark, stern features as he sat in the shadow on the other side of the silken-curtained crib.

The hours slipped by in the dim nursery, where, between the man and the woman, the little one lay in a torpor, which even pain was powerless to disperse. Mary thought he slept, but the baby life-fuel was consuming fast in the fever's furnace, and the hoarse moan which broke at intervals from the swollen mouth grew feebler as the night wore on.

Twice Marrable made up the fire and twice he had laid a finger on the fluttering pulse, but Mary watched in silence.

The big house, with its brightly lit corridors and lofty rooms, where the neglected fires died to grey ashes on the hearths, was silent as the grave. If the servants watched, they did so in their own quarters, to the accompaniment of whispered confidences of blame and pity. Outside, the night was very still, and twelve booming from the church in the Marylebone Road rolled in resonant waves of clear sound over the Park.

The throbbing of the metal tongue roused the child to a fuller consciousness. He drew his tiny pain-racked limbs together under the clothes, and began once more the weary turning of his head upon the hot pillows.

"I'se so fursty," he muttered presently in a thick, hoarse voice. Marrable was on his feet at once, and with one arm raised the fragile little creature.

"Quick, some milk at once, and put some brandy in it," he cried imperatively, as Mary, stiff and sore, rose from her knees and fetched what he required.

A few drops were placed between the parched, dry lips, and then Marrable motioned the spoon away.

"Tank oo," the poor, worn mite whispered gratefully,

and with a supreme effort lifted his heavy eyelids and smiled with his dimmed blue eyes at the two faces—one so dark and one so fair—which, cheek against cheek, hung over the bed.

As the brandy quickened the labouring heart and feeble pulses, a vague remembrance of some favourite toy stirred the aching brain.

"Where's my so'jer? My dear 'ickle so'jer," he cried, in a voice which bitter pain and fierce fever had roughened and made weak.

"What does he want?" murmured Marrable, his eyes fixed on the child, intent on catching the sense of the baby words.

"I think he means a soldier," said Mary bending lower over the cot. "Is it a soldier, my son, one of your toys that you want?"

The child did not answer her directly, but his wasted hands wandered like fluttered lily petals over the bed clothes, and a hoarse wail broke from his fever-parched throat.

"Fetch it! Find it!" commanded Marrable.

With tears blinding her sight and falling in scalding drops upon her hands, Mary went obediently to the roomy cupboard where the toys were kept. Unseeing in her grief, she sought for a soldier, and presently took one, all gay paint and shining varnish, back to the cot.

"Here is a soldier, such a fine one."

But the sick child turned his heavy eyes away, and cried again peevishly.

Again she sought, groping amid the scores of bright play-things. A leaden hussar mounted on a prancing steed and waving a pennon, rewarded her search.

"See, dear!" she cried, hastening to the child, "there he is. Shall he talk to you now?"

She held the toy close to the little one, who, scarcely seeing it, weakly lifted one burning hand, and touched it with frail, sensitive fingers.

A fretful cry of disappointment broke from him, and Mary, sick with despair at the sound, dropped it on the floor, and shook her head in helpless agony.

"Nannie! Give me my so'jer."

Stung by the unconscious appeal to the absent nurse, Mary, with bitter tears pouring down her white cheeks, stumbled once more to the toy-cupboard, and with infinite patience, born of an insupportable pain, sought again for the little broken toy.

And if she faltered, even to bursh the hot tears from her aching eyes, the fretful voice from the bed, calling ever on "Nannie" to find the soldier, urged her on like a thonged whip.

Far back in the cupboard, amid a whole pile of hastily put-away playthings, she found a tiny soldier, battered, bereft of all paint, and headless. She sprang to her feet and flew across the room.

"Here it is at last. Mother has found it."

The child opened his eyes wide, and, stretching out his baby fingers, clutched at the treasure quickly.

That was her dearest reward, and she smiled through her grief at Marrable across the bed.

Her son, gazing in her face, smiled too, first following the direction of her eyes, and then turning a long look on her own face.

But even as he looked, all the sweet baby love died, killed by a throb of pain, and the eyelids drooped once more over the dull, blue eyes.

"Nurse me, nurse me. I'se so tired," he wailed, as he drifted out once more on to the cruel, dark sea of black unconsciousness.

Without one word, Marrable had stood by the bed, immovable and cold as stone, save that the blood leaped and throbbed through the knotted veins of his clenched hands.

"Nurse me," murmured the child, tossing his head upon the pillows.

Still without a word Marrable lifted the little one from the crib, and held him towards Mary.

The love of the mother leapt within her heart, but the iron fetters of humility and restraint chained her limbs, and her arms hung down, flaccid and motionless among the crushed folds of her gown.

"Great God!" cried Marrable, in a voice that rang with wonder, "are you not woman and mother enough to take your own child?"

The fetters were struck off, the barriers were broken down, the floodtide of maternity filled her being. With an inarticulate cry, Mary caught her son to her breast, and with the instinct of the animal who has recovered a lost whelp, carried him away to the further end of the room, where she hushed him on her breast and wept quietly.

It was the morning, pallid and yellow with a lowering fog, before she spoke again. Then she lifted her face, grey and worn with her vigil, and looked across to where Marrable, the silver in his dark hair shining whitely in the circle of the lamp-light, had been sitting through the long hours, with one hand over his eyes, thinking the bitter thoughts of wasted opportunities and lost loves, which come to all men once in a lifetime.

Mary hoped he slept, and with her quiet burden crept slowly over the floor. He started as she brushed by him, and, dropping his hand, raised to her aching eyes a face which one weary night of regret had aged by ten years. She bent so closely over him, that the child on her breast rested also on his heart.

"See!" she whispered, "I was right; he was not very ill. See how quiet and cool he is. He is quite well."

Without answering her, Marrable turned his haggard eyes from her face to the still, pale features of the child, which looked grey and pinched against the full whiteness of her bosom. Silently he rose and followed her to the cot, wherein she gently laid the tiny form.

The little hand, still clutching at the broken toy, was laid on the child's breast. His breath came in long, slow cadences that rattled faintly at the end.

In the supreme faith that her son was resting, Mary put him from her, withdrawing her arms slowly from beneath him.

The movement, slight as it was, stirred the last flicker of the mortal flame. His lips moved, his eyelids lifted their golden fringe from the sunken cheeks.

He passed one hand very gently over his mother's white face, and when he drew his fingers away, a tear glistened on one of them.

He looked with weak curiosity at the crystal drop, and tried to speak, but no sound came; only the glazing eyes expressed his childish wish.

He laid his tear-wet hand against Marrable's dry, set lips, and, as the man savoured of the bitterness of Mary's sorrow, it filled his whole being, even to his soul.

Once—twice—from one mouth to the other the tiny fingers passed; then, scarcely brushing his mother's lips, they fluttered slowly—gently—down—down—down—till they fell, snowflake-light, above the broken tin soldier and the still heart.

Marrable laid the child down, and taking Mary very gently by the shoulders, led her a few steps away. With all the tenderness of a strong hard man who is softened by his pity for the woman he loves, he said in a whisper:

"God has given and God has taken away. Your little child is in heaven!" In one moment all the pent-up reserve of the Mother and all the faith of the virgin were gone. She remembered nothing. She was only a woman and she was frightened, and out of the fulness of her heart she cried aloud:

"Father! Father! why hast thou forsaken me?"

Twice the hysteria of her frantic grief nearly broke from her, and twice she beat it back to her breaking heart.

Then the mercy of tears was vouchsafed to her, and with wet cheeks and blinded eyes she groped her way to her dead child.

"Ah! my baby! My little darling son," she sobbed, and in a very ecstasy of womanly grief, dropped on her knees beside the crib.

CHAPTER XXXII

Mary was not conscious of the precise moment when the acute poignancy of her grief was allayed by the healing balm of Confidence, or when the pale, self-sown flowers of Hope first blossomed on the storm-swept waste of her bruised heart.

She was alone at the time, and with the relief of a calm there evolved the vague remembrance that people had come and gone in the nursery. There had been soft footsteps and quiet whisperings, and she remembered vaguely that the child's nurse had come in and been led away again crying noisily.

Now the room was tidy and fresh, the curtains were looped into precise folds, and the blinds three parts lowered, but above the window sills the pale rays of the November sun filtered on to the floor. A sweet fragrance of lilies floated from a vase, which loving hands had set upon the table.

Only the cot had not been touched. No one had dared, as yet, to disturb the sacred sorrow of the bereaved mother.

She raised her face from where for hours it had laid buried in the pillows close to the wax-white, baby form. The tempest which had swept over her had been too fierce in its passage not to leave traces for all time, but the look of terror had gone from her eyes, and the *rictus* of agony from her mouth. Only the ineffable sadness which lives in the face of the Mother of Sorrows was painted there instead, but the resignation of the Madonna, which is the glory of

all womanhood, was wanting. For in the sunken depths of her weary, tear-washed eyes, flickered and grew and strengthened to a great flame moment by moment the fire of an unquenchable Faith, which only shone the brighter for the healing gush of quiet weeping which broke from her when her gaze first fell upon the still face of her little child.

Her gentle weeping finished, she rose to her feet, and with an almost feverish haste fetched fresh linen, perfumed with violets and edged with fine soft lace. She spread it on the bed, then gowned the tiny clay-cold body in a fresh night-dress of snowy lawn. But swiftly as she worked, every action was touched with that same humble reverence which had been the enforced measure of all her past intercourse between the child and herself.

As she straightened the little limbs and smoothed the tangled curls, an intense peace quivered about her drooping mouth. As she moved about the room, her sorrow seemed to fall from her like a garment, and she looked as though preparing for a *fête* instead of for a funeral.

When all was complete, she took one lily, tall, spotless and sweet, and laid it, a fitting emblem, beside the dead child. Flower-face kissed flower-face on the pillow, and neither was more fair nor stainless than the other.

Her task done, she turned aside and bathed her own face and hands in fresh water, bound the disordered coils of her heavy hair about her head and re-arranged her gown. When she deemed herself fit, she knelt at the foot of the little bed, though not too intimately near, and adored—as poor sinners worship at saints' shrines.

So Lady St. Cyprien and Lady Theo Bellastier found her, wrapped in a mantle of divinest Faith and lifted by Hope above all earthly grief, when, in response to a message from Marrable, they came to weep with her for the death of her son.

It was with uplifted finger and a sad, reproachful smile Mary moved to greet them.

"Dearest Lady St. Cyprien, how kind to come; but I do not want you to grieve for me, or for the little one. He must be so happy—and I—I can rejoice with him. Oh, do not cry. I entreat you not to cry. I did at first; for hours my belief in the Father's goodness was weakened, and I mourned as mothers mourn. But now——!"

A great wave of rapture swept over her white face, and her lips moved silently as though a transport of unspeakable joy thrilled her.

To the two sorrowing women who had come, sad and heavy-hearted, to offer what they could of consolation, her words conveyed nothing, while her very self-control seemed an expression of despair.

Lady St. Cyprien, her delicate face quivering with an emotion which, for the girl's sake, she endeavoured to conceal, clasped Mary in her arms, and rocked her there as one would rock a sorrowful child. The soothing voice, the sweet womanly clasp, touched the vein of self-pity which is in us all, and for a time the two wept softly in a luxury of grief together.

But through her tears and the tears of her dear friend, her strained senses awoke to the consciousness of another sound. It rose from her bedside and had the drone of mumbled prayers.

Mary raised her head from above Lady St. Cyprien's heart and, turning, saw Lady Theo kneeling by the crib swaying her black-gowned body to and fro. Her small ungloved hands fingered restlessly at a big rosary, her eyes were turned upwards in her head, her lips muttered a jargon of Catholic and Protestant supplications. She was fast working herself into a state of religious frenzy, when Mary's voice, hard and tense, struck across her devotions.

"What are you doing there?"

"Praying, dearest Mary, for the dead!"

"For the dead! There is no dead here!"

Lady Theo dropped her rosary with a clatter, and Lady St. Cyprien stretched out supplicating hands to the girl, who, with flashing eyes and quivering body, stood by the bedside.

"Mary, my poor, darling child!" she cried, plucking at Mary's gown.

But Mary, with deaf ears and eyes that saw nothing, let the stemmed passion of Belief creep through heart and brain, body and soul.

"Dead! You think the child is dead?" she cried aloud. "How *dare* you so mock at God—and at me?"

She stooped over Lady Theo, who crouched half frightened on her knees, and, taking her by the shoulder, dragged her to her feet and thrust her back from the bed.

"Where is your boasted trust? Where is your vaunted faith? You who for so long have professed belief in the great miracle that has been, and the grand mercy of forgiveness and redemption that is to be; you who have prayed to be among those who shall in the course of years hear and learn the divine truth; you who have been witness to the manifestation of which I have been the poor medium; are you so little worthy to be tried, so blind, so stubborn, that you cannot—will not—see?"

Lady Theo, her eyes wide with terror, clung to Lady St. Cyprien, whose pale face was bathed in tears of pity and grief.

But Mary, straight and tall, with her arms, from which the full silken sleeves had rustled to the shoulder, raised above her head, stood like a prophetess of old. The fire of the future burnt in her half-closed eyes, and from her mouth, which scarcely moved, she spoke in trumpet tones.

"Do you not know, O you of coward belief and weakest confidence, that the child is not dead? He was not born into the world to die, but to live—live for ever! Do you not understand that it is my faith and the faith of those who are strong enough to believe with me that is being tried? God has sent this great temptation to strengthen and confirm, not to kill, our poor mortal hopes. Have not the prophets said that he who should be born of a pure virgin shall never die, but shall live—to redeem his people?"

Her voice rose higher, and she shook like one in whom an inward spirit stirs.

"The ordeal of my soul, the proof of the prophecy, lies here before me and before you, who have been chosen as witnesses of the truth. My son is not dead, for the attribute of immortality is his. He is for a brief space in heaven, but he shall come again—on the Third Day!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

The morning of the third day crept like a grey ghost through the land. Its pale presence woke the country side to a dreary life. In London, where for twenty-four hours a sweeping rain had fallen, it struck wan reflections from the watery roads and dripping roofs.

One by one the sightless eyes of the houses were opened to the day, but at Holmhurst the blinds remained lowered, and a dim artificial light filled all the rooms. Only in the nursery it was gay and bright. There were no sounds of mourning, there were no signs of grief. A dozen tall candles, set in chased silver, shed a fair light over the flowers, which stood everywhere in gay vases, and about the toys which were scattered on all sides, as though the still little figure on the snowy bed had just turned from his childish games to sleep, and would soon awake to play again.

But the brilliant flowers bloomed and the wax candles sparkled as though they mocked by their life and brilliancy the dead quietude of the room. For he on the bed slept in silence, and she who watched was as still.

The heavy rumble of a passing cart labouring over the sodden road roused her from the conscious coma which in the morning hours creeps over those who have kept a vigil all the night. She rose from her chair, and, walking to the window, raised the blind.

"The day has come!" she murmured, and, opening the window, leaned out to greet the morning.

She was much changed. The cruel, hard light showed that the gleam of red gold had faded from her hair, and that the pulses of young blood had stagnated in her cheek. Her eyes, sunken deep and bistre-circled, were washed quite colourless by weeping and by watching. Her little nose, so fine and delicate, stood sharply out from her drawn, livid face. Her mouth, with the bow-like curves and cherry ripeness which have been the despair and delight of all painters since the beginning of art, was white and dry and set in a straight line.

It was the face of a woman who had suffered to the full, and yet it was the face of a woman who hoped. For as she turned her worn features to the sulky skies she said, "The day has come, and he will come too!"

Leaving the window, she turned to the bed, and gazed one moment on the tiny form which three days back she had with reverential fingers veiled beneath a great square of fine lace. She did not raise the covering, for in her sight it seemed a desecration that merely mortal hands should touch that which was immortal.

She was content to stand with bowed head and mute mouth at the bedside, and savour the sweet, faint scent of the lily which still lay upon the pillow beside the veiled face.

After a little she sat again in the wide, deep chair, and as she leant back among the pillows sleep fell upon her.

And as she slept a dream came to her.

She dreamed she was standing in the centre of a great waste, and that nothing was above her but the inverted hollow of the Heavens, which, cup-like, touched the edges of the world. She stood, a lonely figure in the vast emptiness, and her senses seemed as void and purposeless as the surroundings of her dream.

Cycles rolled by, and Time expired in the arms of Eternity, while she stood—and waited.

Then the dead air quivered and stirred and dimpled into Life, as a stagnant pool is troubled by the passing whirr of a bird's wings. What was first a flutter grew to a sigh, and then to a distant groan. And to the accompanying trample of myriads of feet, and the roar of generations of tongues, the Wanderers of the World, the chosen People of God, the outcast races of men, trooped over the edges of the great plain, and flowed like a mighty flood towards that lonely woman.

They came around her and lapped her very feet as the waves of the rising tide lap the rocks. They lifted their faces, old and young, rich and poor, fair and dark, yet all alike stained with Sin and Death, to her benign countenance, and every face was hungry for Redemption, and every eye yearned for the Promised Land. They called aloud in the Tongues of all Time and of all Nations, but to her who dreamed each one cried the same:

"Oh! Blessed among Women! Chosen of God! where is that Mighty One, the offspring of thy pure body, who shall come and lead us from among strange people, and lands that we know not, back to our own country, to that fair city—the New Jerusalem, where we would be?"

And they fell like mown corn about her, beating their breasts in supplication, and wailing:

"Oh! Mary! Mary! where is thy Son?"

And she dreamed that she raised her eyes, weary with the restless rocking of the human sea, and gazed into the vast heart of Heaven.

The skies above her melted into effulgent mists of azure and rose and gold, and parted like shattered cobwebs on a morning breeze. And down, down, down, floated a wide circle of choiring Angels, which wreathed and twined, expanded and clustered close again about a majestic Figure, which was clothed in white and crowned with flaming gold,

and carried a stainless lily—the emblem of Purity—in his outstretched hand.

Behind the Figure rolled away among the gauzy mists a very fair country, cut with great rivers and set with white cities and gleaming palaces.

"Behold!" said a mighty Voice, which shook the opened Heavens from end to end. "Behold! my People, you called for the Son of Mary, and I am here!"

And Mary looked in the face of the Figure, and it was the face of her Son, only grander, nobler, fairer than she had ever seen it.

The People looked up too and cried out:

"Our Redeemer is come! Blessed is He, and blessed is the Woman who bore him!"

Then she dreamed that they brought a great throne of gold and set her upon it, and it was so high that she too was exalted to the Heavens, and the People—that grand race which had been since the world began, and which she had so suffered to save—worshipped her Son and herself together.

And the adoration went on and on through the endless cycles of Eternity until that too died, and the pæans were all ended. Then with an awful roar the Heavens rolled together in the blackness of night everlasting, and with a mighty crash the golden throne of her glory and exaltation crumbled into nothingness, and she was hurled into the bottomless abyss of space amid the mocking cries of a million devil voices.

Then came oblivion, and she slept the death-like sleep of intense exhaustion.

The hours stole by in soft-footed silence. Outside, a curtain of grey drizzle hid heaven's face and cast a dreary shadow on the world. At half-past three it was almost dark, even in the nursery where the drawn-up blinds let in the last rays of the day.

Once the maid stole in. She was a faithful creature who loved her mistress, and she was pleased that the sleepless vigil of five days and nights was ended and that Mary slept at last.

With quiet thoughtfulness set set fresh candles in the silver sconces, and wherever a flower drooped removed it before she left the room.

It was late when Mary woke with a violent start. The windows were black dark and the newly lit candles winked at her through the gloom. With a low cry she leaped to her feet laying her hands over her heart, which was fluttering like a frightened bird in her bosom.

How long had she slept—how much had she dreamed? Had the dawning of the third day been real, or was it yet to come?

She turned her eyes towards the bed. There all was still, and she sighed with relief. The grey chill dawn, the glorious redemption had alike been dreams. The miracle still remained to be performed.

Just then it seemed to her as though she dreamed again, for the swing of muffled footsteps, the hum of whispering voices rippled to her ears, and, as in her dream, grew louder and came nearer.

The inability of her tired brain to distinguish between the real and the unreal impelled her towards the door, which was ajar. With her hand upon the heavy curtain and her face thrust forward into the bright corridor she listened, striving with all her senses to hear more clearly and to understand.

Drawn by desire, she slipped out of the room, and, crossing the corridor, leaned over the gallery and looked into the big hall below. At first her eyes, still filled with sleep and the subdued light of the nursery, saw nothing, for the big electric chandelier blazed between the floor and herself.

Then by degrees the details of the scene were unfolded, and the dark inchoate masses scattered on the marble pavement took form and shape.

In the doorway of the drawing-room stood Lady St. Cyprien, with Dr. Marrable, Mr. Erastus Bawdon and Martin Baird, whose white head was bowed upon his breast. Away to the left were all the women servants, their white caps and aprons painfully sharp in the strong light. In the centre stood a group of men, all in deep black. They were bareheaded; their greasy hats dotted the *console* tables. One of them carried something under his arm which shone and twinkled like silver as the light caught it here and there. As Mary looked with eyes that widened in her blanched face, the voices and the shuffling steps became accordant, and, as in her dream, the river of humanity rose up and flowed towards her.

Up the wide staircase it rolled quietly, stealthily, but oh! so surely. For its tide was set upwards and towards her child.

Yet there was more of anger than of fear in her heart, as she ran back to the nursery and stood before the bed.

"Who are you? What have you come for?" she said in a low voice, laying her hand on the edge of the frilled pillow, and firmly facing the little crowd, which surged through the doorway and seemed to fill the room.

For a moment no one answered. The hired servants of death were there merely to perform their duty, not to explain their presence. The others, her friends, those who knew the dear faiths and the fond beliefs which were rooted in the very foundations of her being, hesitated among themselves as to who should strike the blow which was to shatter the fabric of her life.

"Tell her, Noel," whispered Lady St. Cyprien, among her sobs. "It will be less hard for you."

A faint smile of bitterest irony crossed his face, which appeared very grey in the candlelight. But he made no demur, nor did he falter, as he strode to Mary's side and said:

"They have come for the child. It is time."

"Come for the child? Time?" she repeated, in a vacant manner, and staring in his face, where something in his sympathetic eyes seemed to rouse a faint fear in her own. Then, with a courage born of a sickening despair, she passed one hand across her damp forehead, and cried, in louder tones: "Time! Yes! it is time! Time for the great God to show His unbelieving people that He still loves them—and will forgive. It is time for the saviour of the world to manifest the truth, and to justify his mother. Behold! The golden throne is set for my son and for me. You who are here shall see the miracle! Believe —and adore!"

She turned, and before Marrable could catch her white hands, she had torn the merciful veil from the bed.

The cry of gladness with which she stooped over the pillows changed to a moan of horror as she gazed, for the fingers of corruption had already marked the little one for its own, and the fading lily was fairer to see than the dead child.

Marrable dared not look down at the bed; his eyes were fixed on Mary, who could only stare and stare at the poor morsel of humanity, as though she saw it not, or seeing, did not understand.

The rich lace dropped from her fingers, and she stepped back from the bedside. With the far-away look of her girlhood's days growing in her face, she stood, rigid and voiceless as a stone, while her baby was hidden away for ever.

No word nor gesture came from her even when all was

over, and, amid the sobs of the women, the men shouldered their light burden, and the procession filed from the room.

Only Marrable remained with her, for he could not go. All the reserve of a lifetime was broken down; the impassive mask of his face, scored by deep lines of study and self-control, was torn and convulsed by a thousand agonies; the suppliant hands he stretched out across the little empty bed trembled with the tearing tide of emotion.

"Mary!" he cried, and the long-stemmed passion of love, the yearning to comfort, made his voice hoarse and sharper.

It should have told her all, but it struck deaf ears, and a dead heart.

"Mary!" he cried again and essayed to touch but one fold of her gown.

"Leave me."

The music of her voice had gone. She spoke dully, as one who talks in sleep, and wrestles with the horror of some awful dream. For the last time he looked upon her face, then turned and left her.

She stood alone—in the centre of the room where the glory of her maidenhood had passed three happy years of life—in the room whence the shame of her womanhood had just been carried in all the corruption of death.

Amid infinite agony, the scales of innocence and ignorance were falling from her eyes, the veil of purity was being torn from her soul. The cruel light of a never-dying day of dishonour was breaking slowly but ruthlessly in upon her; for the child who had come to her out of immortality was mortal, and, oh, God! the Son of man!

He who had been her crown of honour among all women was but the brand of her shame. The boast of her immaculate virginity had been the defilement of her sex.

Her child, born to redeem, and to immortality, had been conceived in shame, had died in sin!

Transfixed with physical horror, and self-loathing, Mary raised her hands to her face, as though she could have rent the beauty which had been her own undoing.

"What man—what devil—dragged me to this hideous shame, and made my darling my disgrace?" she cried, to the empty air.

Then the outraged virgin was lost in the broken-hearted mother, and as she recalled the repressed love, the reverence which had stayed every caress, the awe which had killed every kiss, the floodgates of her starved maternity were opened, and the storm swept over her soul.

Her shattered faith, her stained purity, were forgotten in one overwhelming remembrance. Her little child, her darling baby was dead—and taken from her—and she had been cheated of that last kiss of an eternal farewell.

A great agony caught her by the throat and at the heart. She slipped her clenched hands from her distorted face to her breast. The pain tore at her like a wolf.

Then God had mercy on her, and she crashed unconscious to the floor.

CHAPTER XXXIV

The green-tipped branches of the elms on either side of the lane leaned together as though supporting the blue canopy of heaven above the slowly moving figures of Lady St. Cyprien and Noel Marrable. The sunlight filtering through the foliage made bright pool of shimmering gold on the roadway and the wide grass borders alike. Save for those two, and for some rooks which wheeled and cawed above the swinging tree-tops, the whole countryside was devoid of life as a desert.

The first signs of habitation came from a neatly trimmed growth of laurels which grew under the shelter of a red-brick wall as far as a cupola above a low porch, up which the young ivy was running like a lizard.

"Will you call for me in about two hours?" said Lady St. Cyprien, pausing as she reached this door.

Marrable bowed gravely in assent, and then turned slowly away down the shady road the two had just traversed.

The Countess sighed a little as she watched him go, and noted the slow precision of his heavy footsteps and the too obvious stoop of his square-built shoulders.

"How cruel the past three years have been to him," she murmured to herself. "Who would have thought he would have felt so keenly?"

"The Reverend Mother will see your ladyship in the garden. Will you come this way?"

The narrow oak door beneath the cupola was open, and an elderly woman, whose plain face was rendered attractive

by the white coif and ample grey veil of a nun's habit, stood just within, and invited entrance to the convent precincts.

With softly pattering steps, the porteress led the way across a small flagged court, then opening a gate set in an inner wall of warm, red brick, ushered the Countess into a great garden, which seemed to nestle about the sides of a rambling house.

"The Reverend Mother will come to you here," said the nun, as she closed the *grille* behind her, and trotted away across the paved yard.

Left for a moment alone, Lady St. Cyprien looked curiously round the haven of refuge for broken hearts that Erastus Bawdon's *dilettante* fancy had founded as a safe shelter for such poor tempest-tossed doves as feared, after one storm, to encounter again even the most favourable of the world's winds. All was very peaceful and still. The thick green yew hedges that lined the paths gave to the garden a very cool and shadowy effect. Up in the blue sky great round white clouds ran races, but nothing harsher than the drowsy twitter of a bird, lazily dozing through the hot summer afternoon, broke the scented silence of the enclosure.

Heavy-headed carnations and roses of cream and red, purple velvet pansies and lilies of argentine whiteness, seemed to be queens of this quite realm, so proudly did they flaunt their beauties before the sun and radiant sky. Among them, singly or in pairs, came and went the nuns, who read in silence or mumbled over their beads, or even when they talked spoke as do those who fear to wake a sleeping child.

Grey-gowned and with their long gauze veils floating about them, they seemed to glide like indefinite shadows over the wide, shaven lawns or among the dusky *bosquets*,

as might the pale ghosts in the Garden of Proserpine. As Lady St. Cyprien looked upon their faces, all levelled to a certain similitude of innocence and beatitude by the encircling bands of stiffened white linen, she wondered vaguely if they had even lived at all.

The waiting moments lengthened, and Lady St. Cyprien was fast becoming saturated with the subtle mystery of the place, when the light laugh of a young girl rang through the air. It almost jarred, it was so intensely full of the joy of life. It brought movement, brisk and quick, with it, for at the far end of a broad terraced walk, along which quaintly cut figures of clipped box kept grim sentinelship, appeared a group of girls wearing white dresses and with unbound locks curling about their slim, unformed figures. They were talking eagerly, and were clustered like wind-tossed white flowers about a tall figure, robed in vague dove-grey, who walked among them.

Tears sprang hotly into Lady St. Cyprien's eyes, and blurred the face of the advancing Mother Superior. But the loving heart and faithful memory recognised through the new habit the peculiarly gliding walk, the meekly gracious carriage of the head, and the slender beauty of the limbs, that neither veil nor coarse serge could wholly conceal.

At the end of the terrace the Reverend Mother dismissed the children about her, and with slightly hastened steps came towards the Countess, whose outstretched hands and quivering mouth gave a voiceless welcome even before the two weeping women clasped one another and sobbed out their joy at meeting and their sorrow for the past, which was buried in a grave that was nameless, yet would be for ever green.

The nun was the first to dry her tears, and, with the long delicate hands Lady St. Cyprien remembered so well, she drew the elder woman back to a seat.

"Dear friend, it is so good, so like yourself, to journey here to see me," she said presently, as both grew calmer.

"Dearest child, my one wish all the time I was abroad was to meet you again; my one effort since I arrived home has been to come here."

"I heard you were so ill two years ago in Rome. You are still weak?" The Mother Superior's slender fingers rested for a moment on the stout cane which Lady St. Cyprien held in one hand.

"My doctors say so," she said, with a faint smile. "But for once I know better; it is age—advancing age. I am quite an old woman now."

She heaved the little sigh of regret with which woman yields tribute to the past, but a moment later said, more cheerfully, "And you! How is time dealing with you? Let me see!"

With the same simplicity and lack of self-conscious embarrassment that years ago had made Mary Levinge, the child, display her beauty to her grandfather's aristocratic patrons in the Art Gallery, Mary Levinge, the woman, offered her face now to her friend's scrutiny. In outline it seemed unaltered, and the habitual gravity of expression had defied the passage of sorrow and years. Only the fair, clear skin had taken on a waxen whiteness, and the inscrutable eyes sometimes looked as though they had seen into the great "Beyond."

"You look as beautiful as ever," said Lady St. Cyprien, after long gazing. "And—you seem to have found peace and happiness."

For one brief moment a silence fell. The fluttered leaves, the birds, the very air forbore to stir. A great wave of emotion passed over Mary Levinge's face, and the piteous droop, the sweetly weak quiver of coming tears

touched her lips as of old. Then she smiled bravely, and, lifting her clear, unclouded eyes, she said composedly:

"Yes! I have found peace. This is my little Peace Pool, and perfect quiet and faith dwell here with me. But you are happy, too, I hope. Here, though we are not in the world we are of it, and news of dear friends comes to us sometimes—through our pupils. And so I have heard that Lord Stansdale has married and given you a boy to take the place of the little girl you were once a mother to."

"I am glad that you, too, have children about you, Mary —Reverend Mother!" said the Countess.

Mary smiled at the mistake, and the precision of the correction, and said softly:

"Yes! to have children about one is a great blessing—sometimes."

The last word slipped from her involuntarily; and as though wishing to avoid past memories, she rose hastily and said:

"But will you not come and see the convent, and the children's quarters?"

Side by side the two women crossed the velvet lawn and passed through a glass door into the convent parlour, and then to the wide corridor, from which opened the school-rooms and refectories.

"If it were wet, these great silent rooms would ring with the children's voices, but this summer has been so fine, they even have their classes in the lower garden."

As Mary led Lady St. Cyprien through the white-panelled convent rooms and described the purpose of each, so did she tell of the daily history of her quiet life. Here did she pass the morning hours in meditation, there did she speak out of her faith to those who wavered and doubted.

This room she loved; for of an evening she read here to the children. Then she led the way up the low stairs to

where, in snow-white dormitories, the young girls slept at night beneath the calm eyes of pictured saints.

"They look so pretty when they are asleep," she said, in a voice that shook a little. "But they lie so peacefully, that I am afraid sometimes they may be dead, and I come back each night again to assure myself that all is well before going to the chapel."

From long corridors Lady St. Cyprien caught glimpses of the narrow cells where the sisters themselves snatched rest between the nightly services. Mary's own room was but little larger and very simply furnished. Yet Lady St. Cyprien noted how happy she seemed in the possession of the poor little place, and how she gloried in the peep of flower and sky and tree she had from the narrow window.

A door cut in the wall, led on a small staircase which Mary said led to the chapel. "You will come with me there, won't you?" she asked, with something of her old pleading way. "It is very beautiful," she said. "All that I ever learnt from my grandfather and from Martin Baird I have remembered and utilised for it."

Small though the convent chapel was, it was a very treasure-house of art. One small side altar was especially fair with rare lace and white flowers, and set among the tapers and the blossoms was the little picture of the Madonna which Lady St. Cyprien had first seen hanging in the Bond Street shop.

"Still faithful to that picture?" she queried, as Mary rose from where she had knelt in silent prayer on first entering the chapel.

"Yes! I could not part with it," answeredMary gravely. "For it brought me my joy and my sorrow—and my religion."

A bell rang out a clear note on the afternoon air, and throbbed harmoniously through the chapel, into which the

setting sun was pouring rich rays through the stained glass windows.

"It is the hour for Benediction," said Mary in a whisper, as one by one the grey-veiled Sisters glided into the chapel, and, after genuflecting to the radiant high altar, slipped into their places. "Will you wait for me a little while? Sister Angela shall show you the way."

Lady St. Cyprien followed a silent figure which, after leaving her at the door of the visitors' waiting-room, returned hastily towards the chapel.

Outlined against the window stood Noel Marrable.

"Are the two hours already gone?" cried Lady St. Cyprien. "How quickly the time has passed."

"Have you seen her! Is she well?" asked Marrable abruptly.

"Quite well, and more beautiful than she used to be, I think! and she is happy too—that is a great thing."

"Has she forgotten, do you think?"

Lady St. Cyprien shook her head sadly.

"Noel, women never forget such things. No scars of such tragedies may mar a face, but the hearts of women who have suffered in sprit and in body as she has done must carry the marks of the wounds for all time."

Marrable said nothing, but presently raising his eyes, caught sight of the picture of the Annunciation that Eliot Mayne had once painted of Mary as the Holy Maiden.

"Why is that here?" he cried sharply, nodding towards where the picture hung above the mantelshelf. "I thought it was painted for the little church here."

"Mary told me this afternoon that she had it moved from there when she came. She says she has taken a dislike to the picture."

A burst of music from the open chapel window floated across the garden, now more peaceful than ever, in the rays

of the slowly declining sun. The nuns were singing the Litany of the Blessed Virgin.

"It is scarcely surprising that the associations of it are painful," she went on, her low voice scarcely rising above the distant chant. "The painting of it was connected with misfortune from the beginning, when she had that bad fainting fit at the studio."

"What was that?" said Marrable.

"Did you never know she fainted there once? She told me of it afterwards."

Marrable faced sharply round and stared at Lady St. Cyprien.

"Told you of it *afterwards?* What do you mean?" he cried roughly. "Were you not there at the time?"

"No! I don't understand——"

"And *I* don't understand. I always thought that you accompanied Miss Levinge to Mayne's house."

"That was why it was so unfortunate. I had not been able to go that day, and she went alone."

"Alone!" cried Marrable, in a terrible voice. "Alone and fainting. Poor child! Poor helpless child."

The distant music flowed like a river of peace through the convent garden, and roused the birds to join in the final *chorale.* It swept in grand waves through the open windows, and echoed against the white wood walls. It drowned in the majesty of a grand *Amen* the few words that Lady St. Cyprien forced from her lips. "Noel! Noel! What do you mean? What do you think——?"

"Only what I have always thought;—that *she* was innocent."

He raised his bowed head and looked at the Countess with miserable eyes.

"And you think——"

"I am *sure!* But does she not wonder—or suspect?"

Lady St. Cyprien shook her head.

"I am certain that she does not, for to-day she has spoken quite simply and trustfully of the mystery that God in His own good time will explain."

"Then she must never know. Hush! she is here!"

With the odours of incense and of flowers clinging about her serge robe, and the fervour of ardent worship still in her grey eyes, Mary came quietly from the lawn through the French windows into the room, and Noel Marrable, afraid of his own emotions, with bowed head left the two women alone to their farewells.

It was only when Lady St. Cyprien joined him in the shadows of the porch, that he saw Mary again, standing with her pale, sweet face framed in the white coif, and the vague folds of the grey gauze veil.

She smiled once very sadly and said:

"Farewell, dear friends, farewell. Pray for me, as I do for you."

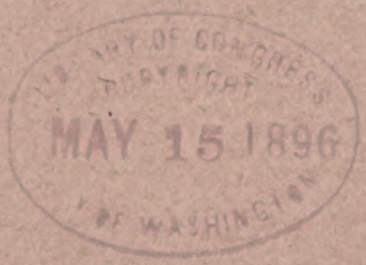
He fell upon his knees reverently, and kissed her white hand; then as he rose, the heavy oak door swung to, and Mary was no more seen.

Without Sin

A Novel

By

Martin J. Pritchard



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